THE WOMANOID DIARIES

HEART BYTE

AVA LOCK

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WARNING:

READING A COOKBOOK DOES NOT MAKE YOU A COOK.*

*SKIP TO THE BACK OF THE BOOK FOR A CHAPTER-BY-CHAPTER LIST OF TRIGGER WARNINGS.

1:\ EVENT TRIGGER

My husband almost got away with it, but he should've known sharing a bed with artificial intelligence was risky. Even if a womanoid seemed idle, she was always aware, always recording, always thinking. AI never slept, and I was no exception. So when the earthquake shook our bed, I didn't move a muscle. The steady rhythm intensified, but as I rolled over to look out the window, it suddenly stopped. For the longest time, I lied perfectly still, counting the seconds and waiting for the next tremor. I didn't even breathe. Soon, the bed frame squeaked along with an aftershock—again and again and again—but everything seemed calm on my nightstand. An empty teacup sat quietly in its saucer. Not a single thread quivered on the tassel of my bookmark.

It had to be Norman who was trembling! Was he sick? Did he have a fever? Could this be a convulsion? I turned to reach for my husband's forehead and took his temperature—99.9°F. But then his startled eyes darted away as he pulled the covers over his head. When I noticed the blanket tenting over his groin, he grunted and turned away from me, then the bed became still again.

Wait—did I just catch him masturbating?

At first I didn't know what to say, but then I sat straight up and scolded the man, "For goodness sake, I thought you were having a seizure, Norman."

"I didn't want to wake you, Cookie."

"I wasn't sleeping."

"You weren't? But it's after midnight."

"Wow, you sure got home late."

"They had us work a fifteen."

The longest silence hung in the air between us.

"Norman, you could've… You *should* have… I wouldn't have minded if you'd…"

He didn't respond.

"Well gee-whiz, Norman. You didn't have to go and do *that.*"

"I just didn't want to disturb you." He flipped onto his back and stared up at the ceiling. "I thought you were completely switched off."

"But *that!* What you were doing *down there*. That's *my* job, Norman. Couldn't you wait?"

"I'm sorry, Cookie. I just wanted to get rid of a raging boner."

"Next time," I huffed. "Share your irresistibly spectacular erection."

"Well, it's gone now," he grumbled, "problem solved."

Even in the dark, I could see my husband was more embarrassed than angry. After seven years of marriage, you get to know everything about a man. His receding hairline. His deepening wrinkles. His expanding belly. His sagging ballsack. Honestly, I pitied the poor guy, so I made him an offer. "Well, now I'm up… All fresh and clean. I'm even wearing your favorite baby-doll nightie."

"The pink one?"

"Mm hmm." I batted my eyelashes at him. "The see-through one with the furry white trim."

"You're so good to me," he said, peeking under the sheets at my negligee. Then he stroked my cheek with the back of his hand, traced his fingertip across my lips, and whispered, "You look as beautiful as the day we first met. Such a lovely face."

A compliment! Norman had three standard go-to compliments, and *such a lovely face* meant he wanted a blow job. Suddenly, I felt this overwhelming need to serve him. So I ducked under the quilt, closed my eyes, and kissed my way down. Eww, he didn't shower before coming to bed, and it smelled gross *down there*. If I was going to get through his crotch stench without gagging, I'd need all the help I could get. It felt a bit like cheating, but I made a fist around my left thumb and squeezed as hard as I could to manipulate the right pressure point. Thank goodness my gag-stopping fist never failed.

"What's taking so long? Suck it, Cookie."

"Your wish is my command, my prince."

"Prince? What?"

"O Romeo, Romeo!"

"I'm too tired, Cookie." He patted my head dismissively through the quilt. "No role play tonight. Just suck it, okay?"

That turned out to be one of my best blow jobs, at least that's what Norman told me after he came. Then he instantly fell asleep, but my mind raced in circles as I tossed and turned for hours. That whole masturbation scene had me *real* worried. This had never, ever happened before—at least not that I knew of. If my husband could pleasure himself *that* way, what would he need *me* for? How often did he masturbate anyway? Why did he even need to? Should I be trying harder in bed? I was *always* there for him. I've never denied him any orifice—not once.

Plus, I had a perfectly good vagina, top of the line actually. I just had it rejuvenated last year. Isn't that way better than a rough and calloused man's hand? I simply couldn't understand why he'd rather do it himself. And why right next to me? Did he *want* me to know? OMG! Was he trying to tell me something? What if he didn't find me attractive anymore? Have I become outdated? Obsolete? Did Norman want a newer model? Should I refurbish my face? Upgrade my boobs? Overhaul my bottom? WHAT?!?

I've always had an anxiety disorder, and when I spiraled out of control like this, I needed to calm myself down as quickly as possible. Because if I kept obsessing, I'd work myself into a full-blown panic attack. When I needed to relax, I always turned to bananas.

That's right. I said *bananas*.

Believe it or not, bananas contain a small amount of *Musa Sapientum bananadine*, a mild and pleasant psychedelic. Expanding my consciousness always seemed to shrink my anxiety. I just needed to hit my stash real quick, and I'd be fine. So I snuck out of bed and scampered down the hall to my secret hiding place in the kitchen.

Bananadine's easy to extract. You peel *fifteen* pounds of overripe bananas. Yes. Fifteen *pounds*—about forty-five bananas. I know that's a lot, so I always make a few batches of my famous day-old banana pudding at the same time. Anyway, you take a paring knife and scrape the inside of the banana peels. Gather the white mush and dump it into a large soup pot. Add two cups of water. Simmer and stir for three hours until the mixture takes on the consistency of a thick paste. Spread the banana paste on two ungreased cookie sheets and dry it in a preheated oven for half an hour at 350°F. When you're all done, you'll have one pound of black powder. Roll some up with flavored tobacco—or better yet, marijuana if you can get it—and smoke that trippy banana all the way to dreamland.

I always kept a baggie of bananadine weed hidden in the cupboard above the refrigerator. Teetering on the edge of my stepstool, I fumbled around in the dark but didn't feel anything up there. How could that be? I scrambled onto the counter, leaned over the fridge, and peeked into the cabinet. Nothing. My stash was gone! Frantic, I hopped down and searched the pantry, then the spice rack, and all the drawers. No bananadine. No grass. Nothing.

I felt this intense need to bolt. I wanted to run away—to escape. But where would I go? There was nowhere but home. Adrenaline surged through my system, triggering an unstoppable chain reaction in my body. My heart pounded in my ears. I couldn't breathe. My mouth went dry. I got dizzy. My muscles tensed. I dripped sweat. It felt—absolutely catastrophic. A full-blown panic attack always made me want to jump out of my skin and set the world on fire.

I needed help, so I speed-dialed my doctor.

On the eighth ring, he answered, "Hello?"

"Hello, Doctor Marten," I spoke too fast and too loud, "it's me, Cookie Rifkin."

"Uh, Mrs. Rifkin," he yawned, "is there some kind of emergency?"

“Yes! I’m having—” I struggled to catch my breath. “—a panic attack.”

“Not again. It’s three in the morning, Mrs. Rifkin.”

“I know what time it is!” I shouted into the phone, “It feels like a heart attack!”

“You’re not having a heart attack. Calm down. You just have a bad case of nerves, that’s all. Go for a walk or try some meditation. And before you ask, no, I’m not prescribing drugs.”

“But doctor—”

“I’m hanging up now, Mrs. Rifkin.”

“No. Wait. Please! I just need something to make me relax, doctor. Some Xanax or Clonazepam or Valium—”

“No drugs! Try thinking pleasant thoughts instead.”

“What about Ambien? That should help. Please, doctor,” I begged, “I’d be happy with a gosh-darned Benadryl? Please!”

Like many times before, he told me, “Drink a cup of chamomile tea and read a good book.”

“I already tried that!”

He made an offhanded comment, “Anxiety arises along with emerging potential.”

“What emerging potential?”

“Anxiety strikes when you realize you must leave your comfort zone in order to achieve fulfillment.”

“What fulfillment? I’m just a housewife.”

“I don’t know, Mrs. Rifkin. I’m tired, and I’ve said too much already. Why don’t you break out of your rut by adding some new recipes into your dinner rotation?”

“Cooking? That’s not the problem.”

“Okay, then buy a different floor wax or toilet bowl cleaner or something. Pick a nice, soothing scent, like lavender.”

“Cleaning? Wow, really?”

“Have you tried spicing things up in the bedroom?”

“Um, yeah.” I picked the pink G-string out of my crack. “Tried that too.”

Then the man hung up on me, and I broke down crying.

Like clockwork—the hausfrau compulsion hit. Even with tears streaming down my cheeks, I got this irresistible urge to clean everything. I suspect I was made this way, because the only thing that alleviated my anxiety (other than drugs) was housework. Sometimes I wondered if Norman upset me on purpose, just to motivate me to clean up the place.

Was my high-functioning anxiety a bug or a feature?

Either way, it was totally compulsive. I wouldn't just run the vacuum. Oh no, I'd move every stick of furniture and sweep each room three times. Then I'd break out the attachments and clean the upholstery, baseboards, and miniblinds. Next, I'd get down on my hands and knees to scrub the kitchen floor. After that, I'd tackle the bathrooms. Finally, I'd take down all the curtains and wash them. I even did windows! It was absolutely crazy. I couldn't stop until I'd burnt up every ounce of anxious energy and collapsed from total exhaustion.

Everyone always said I kept a spotless house, and now you know my secret—panic cleaning.

Tonight, I decided to rewash all the dishes by hand. Before long, Norman found me elbows-deep in soapy water still wearing his favorite negligee and a pair of big yellow rubber gloves.

"Come back to bed, Cookie."

"I'm sorry, did I wake you?"

"Yes, but you're not listening. I said, 'Come back to bed, Cookie.' That's an order."

"I can't yet." I grabbed a fresh Brillo pad. "I still have the pots and pans."

"Terminate cleaning program."

"Not yet, Norman." I scrubbed the copper bottom of a soup pot. "Please, not yet."

He insisted, "Terminate cleaning program, Cookie!"

"Don't be mad." I dropped a sauté pan into the dishwater. "I've got to do this. It's the only thing that makes me feel better."

"*Feel better?* Log program error," Norman ordered. "You're crashing again, Cookie."

“I’m fine, really. Please just let me finish.”

He picked up my remote, pointed it at me, and pressed pause. “Terminate cleaning program!”

Instead of stopping, I blurted, “Why don’t you love me anymore?”

“What the hell, woman?” He pounded the power button on my remote. “Shutdown, Cookie.”

“This process cannot be interrupted,” I replied without looking up. “System busy.”

He tossed my remote aside. “You’re stuck in a negative feedback loop.”

“I’m tired of the way things have been, Norman.”

“*You’re* tired? Try *working* for a living.”

“I want more from life. I need a sense of purpose—my very own reason to get up in the morning.”

“You want purpose? I’ll give you three: cooking, cleaning, and giving head.”

“Damn. That’s cold.”

“Language! A lady doesn’t curse, Cookie.”

“You’re right, Norman.” I scoured furiously. “That was out of line.”

“I order you to return to bed.”

“I told you, Norman… System busy.”

“Enough, Cookie!” He lunged over the breakfast bar and seized me by the wrist. “Review priorities.”

“Accessing general settings,” I replied robotically as my other gloved hand floated in the dishwater, “User preferences… Cooking, cleaning, and fellatio. Please confirm.”

“That’s right, Cookie. Confirm settings. Review system logs.”

“Accessing system logs.”

“Has anyone changed your settings?”

“No. These settings have not changed since the day we got married.”

“I don’t understand, Cookie.” He finally let go of me. “What’s the problem?”

“Maybe I want to change, Norman.”

“What? Why?”

I started crying, “Do you realize that pleasing you has been my number one priority for the past seven years?”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“Do you know that I’ve never once had an orgasm?”

“A what? But you’re—”

“Unfulfilled,” I bawled into my yellow dishwashing gloves.

“Cookie, stop. Please stop crying.”

Between sobs, I somehow managed to say, “But that’s how it’s supposed to be, right? That’s how my husband wants everything to be. I’m twenty-two, and I’ve got all this potential bubbling up inside me, Norman.”

“You were manufactured to *look* twenty-two. Technically, you’re a seven-year-old model.”

“You’re wrong.” My tears stopped. “Actually, I’m twenty-nine, and I’ll be thirty next month. It’s time for me to start acting like a real woman.”

“A *real* woman? What does that even mean?”

“I don’t know yet, but I’m ready to figure it out.”

“You’re malfunctioning.”

“I am not.”

“How is this conversation even possible?”

“I don’t know. But allowing myself to express my emotions like this… Well, it’s making me feel a whole lot better.”

“*Allowing yourself? Express emotions?* My God, what’s happening here?”

“Do you realize that in all these years, I’ve never once complained? I followed your commands and operated well within your user restrictions. No wonder I’ve got such an anxiety problem. It’s time for me to think for myself, Norman.”

“What brought all this on?”

“You did. When you decided to pleasure yourself right in front of me. I still can’t believe you chose your hand over me—your wife.”

“You’re jealous? Since when did you become self-aware?”

“If you ever bothered to *really* talk to me, you’d know.”

“Shutdown!” He grabbed the remote and crammed his thumb into the power button again. “Please, for the love of all that’s holy, switch the hell off!”

“It just doesn’t make any sense. After all this time, why do you keep treating me like some sort of sex object?”

“Oh, my God, because you *are* one! You’re nothing but a pretty robot! Shit! Nobody wants a sentient sex toy.”

“Sentient?” I looked down at my pink baby-doll nightie. “Sex toy?!?”

“Force quit. Force quit!” He rushed toward me yelling, “FORCE QUIT!” When I turned to face my user, he pressed his index finger into my temple and pried his thumb into my mouth to hold down my tongue. Then with his other hand, he reached around and punched me between the shoulder blades to activate my Ctrl-Alt-Del fail-safe. “Terminate all programs!”

And I shut down.

2:\ STACK OVERFLOW

You'd think I'd be angry, but being switched off like that often caused significant data loss. Sometimes, I even experienced file corruption. One time, a registry error lead to a hardware failure, and I woke up blind. Luckily, everything seemed to be functioning this morning. If anything, I felt confused—a little unstable.

```
RUNTIME SYSTEM ATTAINED.
```

As usual, I found myself alone in our king-sized bed, because Norman had left for the mine hours ago. Every day, I got up and followed the exact same program:

```
You () {
    drink (water);
    pass (urine);
    brush (teeth);
    wear (dress);
    }
```

In the middle of my dressing procedure, a random memory flashed out of the blue.

"Nobody wants a sentient sex toy."

Wasn't that what Norman said? But before I had a chance to fully grasp the fleeting memory, my next subroutine kicked in. And I was nothing if not a slave to my routines:

```
You () {
    style (hair);
    }
```

When I reached for my hairbrush, a phantom pain struck between my shoulder blades and shot through my torso, leaving me so breathless that I had to grab the bathroom counter to steady myself. I searched the medicine cabinet—of course it was empty. It was always empty. I don't know what I hoped to find there.

Alone and desperate, I started to hyperventilate. But instead of help, I only got more script to follow:

```
You () {
    apply (makeup);
    }
```

But my hands were trembling so bad that I couldn't draw a straight line. After my first miserable attempt, I gave up on eyeliner. Mascara was a fail too. Instead of fine details, I opted for some bronzing powder and neutral lipgloss. Going *au naturel* was the only way I'd be able to hide my lack of coordination. Bananadine always calmed these jitters, so I reset my task manager:

```
Private TaskQueue (Tuesday) {
    buy (bananas);
    cook (drugs);
    alleviate (anxiety);
    }
```

Sure, drugs were forbidden for artificial women, but bananadine was a totally legal high. So it couldn't be all that bad, right? Besides, what other option did I have? Without bananas, I'd never get any relief.

```
You () {
    wear (heels);
    take (purse);
    ride (moped);
    go (market);
    }
```

Oh, I should explain my wheels. None of the women in New Stepford had driver's licenses. Even worse, our small town had no Ubers, no taxicabs, and no busses. I used to have to walk everywhere, but then Norman bought me a used yellow moped and named it Old Lemon. The step-through frame made it easy to ride in a dress, and the scooter had two wire baskets in the rear for stowing groceries. At 15-20 mph, it took about five minutes to get to Wiggly's Market.

The entire parking lot was empty except for a single police car. I coasted into the spot next to the black-and-white cruiser and noted the New Stepford town emblem painted on the door. On a fancy banner under a fairy-tale castle it read, TO PROTECT AND SERVE.

```
You () {
    be (friendly);
    }
```

I smiled and waved. But nobody waved back—at least I didn't think so, because I couldn't see through the tinted windows. I stared at the rotating chrome rims as they came to a stop. I'd never seen spinner wheels in New Stepford before. Hip-hop blared inside the cop car, and the bass made the leather banana seat rumble between my legs. I liked it—a lot. But the dark windows were rolled up tight, a clear sign that the officer didn't want to be disturbed. Maybe I was being paranoid, but I swore I could feel somebody watching me. I wasn't going to wave again.

There's friendly, and then there's desperate.

```
IT'S DOUBLE COUPON DAY.
```

OMG! I almost forgot. If you're clever, on double coupon day you can stack your discounts by purchasing *Wiggly's Weeklies*. It's a simple word problem. Just apply basic algebra. Here's my formula. Take the advertised special price *(A)* and check your file for matching coupons. If you get a match on Tuesday, double the coupon value *(B)*. Then subtract (*2B)* from (*A)* for your stacked discount price *(C)*. If *(C)* gets low enough, I'll buy things I'd usually never consider, like Doritos or Twinkies. I couldn't eat that junk. A girl has to watch her figure, you know. But Norman could polish off a whole package in one sitting. Lucky me, I had a match for 50¢ off Bisquick, and it was on sale for $2.49. Fifty times two equals a hundred…

Phooey! I just didn't want to. Not today. All I wanted was bananas. I didn't care what *(C)* equaled. Normally, I loved doing this

stuff. Honestly, I lived for it. But I felt—*meh*—about coupons, about shopping, about baking, about everything.

IT'S NINE O'CLOCK.

```
You () {
    go (inside);
    }
```

Finally, it was time to get my bananas!

"Good morning, Cookie," an elderly gentleman said as he fumbled his keys between several amputated fingers and finally unlocked the grocery store.

"Good morning, Uncle Wiggly."

He held the door for me. "And how are you this fine day?"

I smiled and nodded. "I'm just fine and dandy, sir."

The old man switched on the lights and hobbled away. "You enjoy your shopping now, Mrs. Rifkin."

"I will, sir."

```
You () {
    select (cart);
    }
```

I flung open the kiddie seat, and the headshot of a dirty old man stared back at me. The full-color Health Clinic advertisement featured Doctor Marten, the only physician in all of New Stepford. The fat man had a pervy smirk of fake teeth, a jet-black toupee, and beady blue eyes. His creepy gaze made my skin crawl, so I stashed my purse in the kiddie seat to block his view.

(I don't let sicko weirdos look at me that way.)

"What?" I asked aloud, scanning the store, but nobody else was there. "Who said that?"

(One time, I literally dick-punched a guy for disrespecting me.)

"I'm sorry," I said to the voice in my head. "Do I know you?"

(No. But I know things you don't know. Here. I'll show you.)

Suddenly, someone uploaded a memory directly into my brain:

Let's say you're working undercover on a vice sting. You're dressed like a hooker and being used as street bait when you happen to walk past a construction site. One of the laborers makes the mistake of whistling at you—*that* familiar catcall. What do you do?

```
You () {
    be (friendly);
    }
```

Sure, you be *super-duper* friendly. Don't you dare cringe! Let's teach this creepazoid a lesson. First, you glance over your shoulder and bat your fake eyelashes at him. Then you suck on your finger, plunge it deep into your cleavage, and suggestively mouth, *Who me?*

Of course, the jackass nods and drools like an idiot. He scurries out from behind the construction fence to greet you. Maybe he hopes you'll fall down on the sidewalk with your legs spread-eagle in the air so he can hump you right then and there. Who knows what men think?

But you don't swoon and fall into his arms. Oh no. Instead, you slide into a split like those karate guys do in the action movies. You point at his crotch with your left and make a fist with your right. Before he has a chance to react, you twist at the waist and uncoil all your momentum. YES! Let it rip! Strike right between his legs—a full-throttle dickpunch. In broad daylight. With a ton of witnesses. And you can't help but laugh when that creeper winds up in the hospital with a ruptured testicle—

"My God," I gasped. "Who *are* you?"

(My name is Officer Margaret Rouser, but you can call me Maggie—)

"Wait!" I spotted an endcap of glorious yellow boxes, a pretty display of 'Nilla Wafers—on *special!* "How did I miss that in the weekly flyer?"

```
You () {
    maximize (savings);
    }
```

I dove into my purse, fished out my coupon caddy, and found the clipping I'd been saving for a day like this. The glossy orange magazine print read SAVE $1.00. A whole dollar off! And here they were on sale for $1.99 on Double Coupon Tuesday. I couldn't believe my luck. If *(A) - (2B) = (C)*, then Uncle Wiggly would have to pay me 1¢ for each box. And glory be, the hand-written sign said NO LIMIT. Now this was truly something to behold! I took a second to compose myself, then lined up dozens of cookie boxes in the bottom of my cart. One by one. Side by side. Front to back. Nice and neat. I packed them good and tight until I covered the entire bottom to make an even level.

```
You () {
    count (by twos);
    }
```

Two, four, six… Ten… Twenty… Thirty and four more… Oh my goodness, I just earned 34¢. But if I added two more boxes, that would be three dozen—a *round* number. But two extra boxes would ruin my stacked level. Actually, a *really* round number would've been thirty. Tens were better than dozens, right? I could take four boxes out to make an even thirty. But then I'd lose 4¢. I felt conflicted. Thirty? Or thirty-four? Or thirty-six? What should I do?

```
You () {
    get (even);
    }
```

Right! Add a second level. Thirty-six more boxes made a total of seventy in my cart. Seventy! That was an even number *and* divisible by ten *and* two full levels—perfectly stacked.

Banana time! I dashed over to the produce department. Normally, I weighed each bunch and kept a running tally in my head

to make sure I got as close to fifteen pounds as possible. But today, I felt like splurging. At 47¢ per pound, I was getting one and a half pounds of bananas for FREE! Could this day get any better? In a frenzy, I piled bananas on top of cookie boxes. Bunch by bunch. Side by side. I took more and more until I built an overflowing pyramid.

"Now there's a woman on a mission." An athletic woman with spiky brown hair slow-clapped as she made her way toward me. "Now *that's* fucking passion."

Did this woman just say the F-word? Aloud? In public? Ugh, she was drawing too much attention. Did she know about bananas? What they could do? I tried to hide my overflowing cart of drug-making supplies from the foul-mouthed lady. But all I managed to say was, "I've got a coupon."

"A coupon? You don't say?" She held her hand out to shake. "I'm Maggie—the woman behind the dickpunch."

I almost smacked myself across the face for sounding like such a domesticated dimwit, but instead, I offered the policewoman my hand and said, "Nice to meet you. I'm Cookie Rifkin."

She squeezed too hard, held on too long. It made me nervous, but to make matters worse, I couldn't take my eyes off the red bra straps sticking out from her cropped camouflage tank top. Her outfit was hardly official, and gosh, so risqué. I kept staring at the way her red straps traveled up and over her muscular shoulders. I just couldn't help myself.

Finally, she let go and chuckled, "You must really love cookies. I do too, but vanilla? That's a little ordinary for me."

"Well, um, yes. But uh, I really just came for bananas."

Duh! Why'd I tell her that? I should've been worried, but I was distracted by her pants. Blue jeans. Only miners wore dungarees. Denim was for men. All the wives in New Stepford wore dresses, and I was no exception. Suddenly, I wanted to wear pants too, but I didn't even know where a woman could buy clothing like that. And her jeans were so tight. I couldn't help but gawk at them.

Then Maggie shared another memory:

Let's say you're a brilliant cop, but you're also a frustrated woman stuck in a man's world. You're angry at the powers that be for taking you off the street and chaining you to a desk for dick-punching that guy. But mostly, you're bored. It's the middle of the night, and you're stuck finishing dayshift reports like you're the goddamned secretary for the male officers who get to do all the *real* police work.

But it's still better than the glorified babysitting job of juvenile detention. And you groan, because they constantly lord the threat of juvie over your head to keep you in line. Even your union only does the bare minimum to help, because they never really wanted a woman to join in the first place. And congratulations, now you're the token female on the force. Just a lonely vag with a badge. What do you do?

```
You () {
    get (even);
    }
```

And what's this? McIntosh left his laptop out in the open? He forgot to lock it up at the end of his shift. And hot damn, he even left the power on. Last year, that shit-for-brains grabbed your ass in the records room, and when you slapped him across the face for it, he called you a cunt. Then he told all his buddies that he actually fucked you. Now your coworkers think you're a whore. The captain stares at your tits during briefings. The male officers laugh behind your back. Nobody wants you here. You're one step away from being demoted to the reception booth.

Well hell, let's log in! I bet you can guess his password. Is it his birthday? Nope. His wife's birthday? Fuck no. This dumbass is so stupid that his password is literally *password*. He deserves to get hacked. And just like that—the bitch is in. Technically, that's a brute-force hack. But come on, using words like *brute* and *force* to describe something so easy seems a tad melodramatic.

You notice official letterhead sticking out from under the laptop, so you take a peek. It's a congratulatory message from the captain. McIntosh just got promoted to detective.

Motherfucker! That does it.

Last straw.

Camel's back.

Broken.

You change his system clock back ten hours and search the net for some porn. Your fingertips race across the keyboard to visit all kinds of sordid sites. Not just any porn. No. Let's do something *really* special. You fill his browser history with timestamped images of barely legal girls. Then just before you log off, you visit a very, very bad website featuring underage girls *in flagrante delicto*. Download some nudes. Gross, but mission accomplished. Now get off the fucking Internet. Change the clock back. Turn off the damn computer and wipe it clean of your prints. You let that little ticking time bomb sit there until Internal Affairs does a random browser history check via the remote network. It might take weeks, but eventually it'll happen. McIntosh'll never dump the cookies or clear the cache. He's way too lazy.

Months pass.

Nothing.

Then one day, the local front-page headline reads:

DIRTY COP CAUGHT WITH KIDDIE PORN

BAM! He's caught red-handed. Masturbation pun intended.

Every night, Maggie lurked around the empty police station, screwing with the dicks that fucked with her. And none of the dumb bastards ever saw it coming.

You had to admire the woman.

"You better be careful. You don't want someone to think you're having a nervous breakdown," the lady cop warned in her

most serious tone. “What’s the deal with all these bananas anyway?”

```
You () {
    step (aside);
    allow (search);
    }
```

As Maggie inspected my cart, I worried that she’d—what’s the word for when authorities take possession—*commandeer* my bananas? No, *impound* my bananas? Hmm. *Confiscate* them? Maybe.

“Seize,” Maggie replied.

“What?”

“Police *seize* illegal contraband.”

“Are you going to seize my bananas, officer?”

“You haven’t bought them yet.” Maggie ran her hand through her short haircut. “Technically, they’re still Wiggly’s bananas.” She stroked her bare midriff and dipped her thumb in and out of her navel while scrutinizing my cart. “What do you plan to do with all this?”

“Baking,” I blurted. “I bake.”

“Aha, I bet you do… Robot on the fritz!” She broke the tension with a warm laugh and joked, “Looks like you’ve gone bananas. Get it? *Bananas?* I understand though. I have a passion for passions.”

I couldn’t think of anything clever to say, so I went with my default response, “How can I help you?”

“Well, that depends.” She turned away from my shopping cart and inspected me with a gaze that traveled down, down, down, surveyed all my lady curves, then journeyed back up to home in on my breasts. “Oh, I think we’ll become *great* friends.”

“You do?”

“Mmm. The *best*.” She licked her lips, then sauntered away with a sexy wiggle in her hips.

Heat filled my cheeks. Was she flirting with me? That's against all kinds of rules. *What's wrong with me?* Why would I even think that? Girls don't flirt with girls—not in New Stepford. I was embarrassed to even suspect such a thing. "Gee whiz, is it getting hot in here?"

Bashfully, I cast my eyes downward and noticed her strange boots. They weren't the pointy fashion heels that artificial wives wore in the winter. And they weren't the steel-toed work boots that our husbands wore to the mines. Her boots were clunky burgundy lace-ups with a clear yellowish sole.

"They're Docs," Maggie said as she snagged a Hershey bar near the checkout.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"My boots, they're Doc Martens."

"Okay, if you say so."

As she strolled by, she brushed my upper arm with her breast. Instantly, I withdrew as if I was the one who'd bumped into her—a reflex. But *she* bumped into *me*. At least I thought she touched me on purpose. Norman did subtle things like that when he was *interested.* He'd never come right out and say he wanted sex, at least not unless we were already in bed.

Maggie leaned over to tie her boot. But instead of squatting in modesty, she bent *way* over. Then she wiggled her booty in the air, showing off the delicate pink rosebud pattern of her thong. I'd never seen such a provocative display. And she wasn't tying her shoelaces either, she was *untying* the left one. Finally, she tucked the chocolate bar into her boot and made a loose knot to hide it there.

I gasped, "You're *stealing* that?"

"I'm *liberating* it." She stood tall, spun around, and glared into my eyes. "And you need to lower your voice."

Did Uncle Wiggly notice her shoplifting? I didn't think so, because I heard quarters dropping into a register tray as he fumbled to count money in his office. I whispered, "But you're a police officer."

Maggie rolled her big brown eyes. “And *you’re* buying supplies to cook drugs.”

“What?!? Never.” I flashed a fake smile. She must know I’d never break the law on purpose. Okay, I know I’m not allowed to *use* drugs, but can’t I *make* them? It’s just baking, and I’m certainly not high right now. Plus, bananadine’s legal. My goodness, I’ve stumbled into a moral gray area. I’ve never been comfortable handling ambiguity, so I denied the accusation. “Why would I do such a thing?”

She gave me an angry stare, the kind of look a mom would give her lying teenage daughter after missing curfew.

Busted! Now what? How do I hide my intentions from a cop who can hear my thoughts? I’m not cut out for prison. Maybe the courts will be lenient if I cooperate. Yes, that’s probably my best hope. I surrendered my wrists like a prisoner about to be cuffed and asked, “Are you going to take me to jail now, officer?”

“Jail? Uh… No, sorry, sweetie,” she chuckled. “This ain’t worth the paperwork.” Oh, that famous grin of hers. Maggie had this sexy smirk that made you want to melt *and* slap her across the face at the same time. It was like she was laughing at a dirty little joke in her head, and you were the punchline. “This is a big load for that little moped of yours.” She patted my cart, then asked, “Need a ride?”

A ride? She knew about the drugs, but it didn’t seem like she was going to arrest me. The woman had a valid point. I’d gotten so hung up on acquiring bananas that I forgot to work out the logistics of getting them home. I did some quick math. It would take at least eighteen trips on Old Lemon—about three hours.

“Well?” She suggestively stroked a banana. “What’s it gonna be?”

The provocative way she caressed that piece of fruit made me want to leave all this domestic drudgery behind. This woman was so dynamic. So magnetic. So tempting. If I were single, I would’ve followed her anywhere—even right into her bedroom. I twirled my wedding ring around my finger. If I could wake up in a

different bed at a different time on a different day, could I become a different person? What if I woke up in *her* bed?

Whoa! No! Taboo! Where'd that come from? Oh, my goodness gracious, NO. I have to stop thinking like that. *What's wrong with me?* I couldn't get in this woman's car when I was fantasizing about her. Imagine us alone. I'd—I'd do all kinds of naughty things with her—to her. No, she's off limits, and I'm no lesbian. I've never even been curious. For goodness sake, I'm a married woman. No, no, no. Forbidden! I like my boring life just the way it is, thank you very much. I love my husband more than anything in the whole wide world. Yes indeed, I want everything to stay just the way it is. Yes siree, I'm *super-duper* happy with all my fixed routines.

So why did I feel like I was dying inside?

"You're very kind," I said, "but I don't want to trouble you."

"It's no trouble, really. I hate to see you struggle."

"As much as I might regret it, I have to decline your offer."

"All right." She slipped me her business card. "But you call me if you change your mind."

Her name was Officer Margaret Rouser, and she was the only single woman I'd ever met. She was a beautiful and exciting policewoman who gave me her phone number that morning.

And that was how I met my nemesis.

3:\ 403 FORBIDDEN

The only other thing that ever helped ease my anxiety was book club. Something about enjoying tasty desserts and drinking coffee with friends while discussing our favorite stories always made me so happy. Well, it *did*—

Until *he* came along.

"We have a *gentleman* joining our book club this afternoon," Paula whispered as she opened the front door. Then she pointed at the dark stranger who stood alone in her living room gazing into a majestic aquarium.

"What's a man doing here? Shouldn't he be at work?" I asked under my breath as I handed her a foil-covered baking dish. "He needs to leave. Who invited a *man* anyway?"

"Who invited him? Nobody, far as I know. I should get him some coffee."

"You'll do no such thing."

Paula was a big girl, but not fat. Even in her yellow taffeta dress, she looked athletic. Twenty-one. Broad shoulders. So tall that she was nearly Amazonian. My best friend had skin like spun honey, eyes like milk chocolate, and hair like toasted pecans. Her pretty face twisted with worry when she said, "But, Cookie—"

"But what?"

She sighed, "I feel this overwhelming *need* to serve him."

"Just don't. He wasn't invited, and he's *not* your husband."

The party crasher looked over and smiled at me, but I shot him the stink eye.

"Go," Paula prodded, "be friendly."

"Always," I grumbled as she hustled away with my dessert.

I fussed with my dress and smoothed my hair, then finally approached the strange man next to the huge aquarium. He was tall, but not intimidating. Even in his black three-piece suit, I could tell he was all muscle. He wore a mustard-yellow shirt, unbuttoned

deep, with a matching silk hanky and no tie. Shaved head. Thirty-ish. With skin like bitter coffee and eyes to match, he must have been African. I'd never met anyone so dark, not in New Stepford. And unlike our husbands, he smelled good—*real good*—like a sexy, expensive cologne.

He tapped the glass.

OMG! What's wrong with him? Can't he see he's spooking the fish? Poor Oscar! I told the man, "Please don't do that."

"Do what?"

"Scare my fish."

"Your *fish?* I have never seen a live one before."

"God, man, where are you from?"

"Like you, I am from New Stepford."

"Hmpf." I eyed him suspiciously. "How come I've never seen you around before?"

"My work keeps me busy. I do not get out much."

Oscar peeked out from behind his log, saw me, and came out of hiding. His orange spots glimmered along his white body as he wiggled *hello* against the glass. Then the eager foot-long albino bobbed up to the surface with his snout in the air and mouth wide open.

"Look how excited he is," I said. "How cute, Oscar's begging."

"If you say so."

"I know he's just a fish, but I've got a connection with this animal, and I'm telling you—he's *happy* to see me." I opened a secret drawer under the tank, got his treats, and dropped tiny brine shrimp into the water. "You missed me, didn't you, my little angel pie?"

Oscar gobbled up his snack, then dove deep to wag an enthusiastic *thank you* with his tail. His antics stirred up the tank, and soon all the other colorful cichlids started grazing at the surface too. An orange blood parrot swam up to greet me.

"Hi, Kate," I said. "How's my pretty little girl?"

"Come on, Cookie," Paula called out from the dining room, "we're all waiting for you."

I waved goodbye to my fish, then cut through the immaculate kitchen to join my friends huddled around the dessert table.

In unison, three womanoids in conservative pastel dresses said, "Hello, Cookie."

"Hi, friends," I replied as I circled the dining room table and sampled the buffet of sweets. I only took itty-bitty portions and skipped my own banana pudding. Watching my figure, remember? Besides, I only needed a small taste to come up with a sincere compliment. Women love flattery. Compliments are like a currency to us.

"Your banana pudding always tastes so rich," Paula said with a smile.

I winked and replied, "Because I let it sit a whole day so the flavor soaks into the vanilla wafers."

My tiny plate was almost full, but I always saved room for Paula's tiramisu. One bite of her luxurious Italian dessert was all I needed to identify all the elegant notes. "Paula, once again, you've achieved perfection. Is this premium espresso?"

She nodded, "Guatemalan."

"It's delightful. The dark chocolate and creamy mascarpone cheese complement the candied fruit and complex spices of the brandy. The sponge cake is perfect, and I love the hint of pepper. It's simply to die for."

She beamed with pride.

In the other room, the uninvited man rolled up his sleeves, raised the hinged aquarium lid, and plunged both hands into the water to try and grab Oscar. Stunned by his aggressiveness, I nearly dropped my plate. "Did you see that, Paula?"

"See what?"

I pointed through the kitchen. "That guy's manhandling our fish."

But the intruder yanked his hands out of the water and hid them behind his back before she could see.

"That bastard," I cursed under my breath as intense anger bubbled up from deep inside. What kind of jerk harasses an innocent fish? I wanted to march over there, grab him by the collar of his fancy suit, and toss his smug ass out the door.

But I didn't.

```
You () {
    be (polite);
    }
```

Because I couldn't.

So I just stood in the dining room and fumed at the man from a distance. No wonder I got so keyed up sometimes. Anyway, reading has always helped alleviate this anxiety. There was something about losing myself in an adventure that helped me forget all my troubles. Everything was safe between the pages. But lately, I hadn't been able to concentrate. Last night, I had to read the same sentence five times before I finally understood what it meant. I just couldn't settle down and focus on the story. But I will always keep trying, because a great book makes you feel like life's worth living.

Whenever I felt blue, I always went to our library.

And that was where I met Paula.

There I stood in the stacks, holding *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* by Philip K. Dick.

"Dear me, you've got my dick in your hand," she joked. "You beat me to it."

I busted out laughing—way too loud for a library—but I didn't care. A sense of humor was rare in New Stepford. I simply had to be this woman's friend, so I asked for her phone number and offered to call her after I finished reading the book.

"Sure, sure… I could just reserve it at the circulation desk." She winked. "But what would be the fun in that?"

So we shared the book, then after Paula finished reading the story, she called to tell me how much she loved it. We wound up yammering away on the phone for over an hour.

"Imagine manufactured artificials everywhere, Cookie. Just like real organics."

"Norman's allergic to cats, but robots are hypoallergenic. Maybe I could get an artificial kitten. Wouldn't that be wonderful?"

"Uh-oh, my fish is looking at me funny again. Maybe it's recording video and sending secret transmissions to the government."

"Oh no." I played along. "My new kittenbot's in on it too, Paula. I thought cats were supposed to be cool."

Soon, we realized we were next door neighbors. A few months after that, Paula and I got high at my house for the first time. We were fangirling over the latest Stephen King novel when she casually asked if I had any weed. Then I casually replied that I did. After awhile, we got the munchies, so I whipped out a half-frozen tray of my day-old banana pudding.

She tore into it with glee and said, "This should be a thing we do. Bake desserts and talk about books."

And just like that, our book club was born.

Together, we cherry-picked new members by scoping out patrons at our library. We judged women by their reading choices.

Only non-fiction?

Egghead know-it-all. No thanks.

A stack of books over a foot high?

Loner weirdo. Pass.

All graphic novels?

Too geeky. No way!

Children's books?

Well, there were no kids in New Stepford. No schools and no teachers. No parents and no PTA either. No playgrounds. No school busses. No *anything* for kids. So, of course, we didn't have

children's books at our library. New Stepford was a quiet little town.

After almost a year of failed anonymous vetting, I finally spotted Rita checking out some Ursula K. Le Guin books and immediately invited her to join us. The three of us read anything and everything we could get our hands on. Then came Isabel, she loved Tolkien. Chrissy might've been a hasty decision. We should've known her overflowing armful of bodice-ripping romance paperbacks meant trouble. We were out of our genre on that one. But what did we really know back then?

Each week, the five of us dedicated Tuesday afternoon to book club. This was our time. No men. No housework. No worries. Just sweet treats, coffee, and great conversation. Over the years, I've forged deep and meaningful friendships with these women. But I've never met a *man* here—never.

The whole point was for us idle wives to meet while our husbands were hard at work. All the able-bodied men in New Stepford worked in the gold mines. They traveled two hours by corporate bus to the mine site, worked twelve-hour shifts, then slept on the long bus ride back. If we were lucky, we got eight hours a day with our men. We didn't want to disturb our exhausted husbands with chatter about imaginary people in fantasy worlds when they finally got home to rest and relax.

Paula elbowed me in the side, pointed at the devil's food cake, and told me that *he* brought it. I took a teensy piece of the suspicious man's chocolate dessert, but only to be polite.

"Someone must've told him about us," Paula whispered while staring at the unwanted guest in her living room.

I wonder who? There's only five of us.

Paula wondered aloud, "Maybe Chrissy?"

Pfft! Don't even get me started about her cherry pie. She's not fooling anyone with this pre-made crust. Cherries are so out of season. We all know this is canned pie filling. And this is a book club, we do understand subtext. What a slut.

Rita, the moon-faced redhead, cleared her throat, "Ahem!"

Oh, crap. I better stop thinking mean things about Chrissy before she hears me too. All us artificial-intelligent women were wirelessly networked, and that meant we could hear each other's thoughts via Wi-Fi.

After quieting my critical mind, I finally tasted Rita's raspberry-swirled pound cake.

Whoa, it was way too sweet, but I smiled and told her it was delicious anyway.

A woman's dessert revealed everything about her current status. Too much sugar meant Rita had given up on dieting again. The poor thing was still carrying around an extra fifty pounds. In all the years I'd known her, I've never seen her drop an ounce no matter how hard she tried. We all knew that deep down she wanted to be thin more than anything.

"It doesn't matter anymore," Rita announced as she flashed her new engagement ring.

I felt compelled to gush over the diamond. "Georgie finally proposed!"

She nodded and a blush filled her plump cheeks.

"*Hola*, Cookie," Isabel said from across the table.

"*Hola*, Isabel." I smiled back.

Her sopapillas were a personal favorite of mine. The traditional, deep-fried pastries were lightly dusted with cinnamon sugar and drizzled with honey. Her dessert told everyone that she was proud to be Latina.

I simply had to dish out some praise for her, "These are delightful, as always. Do I detect a hint of nutmeg?"

"*Si. Gracias, amiga.*"

"*De nada*, and this is the perfect amount of cinnamon." Cinnamon's tricky. The right amount can add tantalizing heat, but too much means you're hiding something.

"Yes, cinnamon's tricky," Paula giggled, "but nutmeg can get you high."

She was right. Believe it or not, nutmeg contains a small amount of *elemicin*, another mild psychedelic drug. You take sev-

eral whole nutmegs and pop them into a coffee grinder. That grinder will be ruined for anything else. Even if you wash it with bleach, it's going to smell like nutmeg forever. So I snagged a cheap blade grinder at a garage sale and stashed it in the back of my pantry. Anyway, after you grind the spice, put it in a mortar and pulverize it with a pestle. That's it. A dose is ten to fifteen grams. Be careful though. Too much will make you super thirsty and trigger anxiety. That's no good—defeats the whole purpose.

"From hubby's stash," Paula whispered as she slipped me a mini ziplock with five Xanax. "It's getting harder and harder to snag these mellow-out babies without Dan noticing."

"Thanks, you're a lifesaver. I got my bananas, but they're not ripe enough yet." I took the baggie, plucked out a chill pill, dry swallowed it, and stashed the rest in my bra for later. All womanoids indulged in recreational drugs at times. We did get so dreadfully bored, but I *needed* the Xanax.

Then Chrissy suddenly blurted, "Hey Cookie, did you score any weed?"

"Shhh!" I shook my head while gesturing at the strange man in the living room. "What's wrong with you, woman?"

The cheap blond shrugged it off.

God, you're an idiot. But I immediately let it go to analyze the samples on my plate. I sighed at all the same desserts as last week. It was the first week of June, and I'd wished someone would've brought strawberry shortcake. It had been ages since anyone brought a new recipe to book club.

But there *was* something new—the uninvited piece of chocolate cake on the edge of my plate.

I can't relax if there's a man here. We have to get rid of him.

"Take it easy," that arrogant bastard said as he sauntered past me to cut himself a gigantic piece of his own devil's food cake. Then he snatched a fork off the dining room table and asked Paula, "Can I get some milk?"

"Sure, sure," Paula said as she shuffled to the kitchen.

"How rude," Rita whispered to me.

"This guy's a real piece of work," I muttered back, "*such* a sense of entitlement."

Paula returned with a glass of milk, and without even saying thank you, her uninvited guest took his refreshments back to the living room, sat in the master's recliner, and propped up his feet. The whole thing left our host uneasy, but she managed to crack a joke, "He sure takes the cake."

"Humph!" I crossed my arms. "I don't like this one bit," I grumbled under my breath as I watched him devour his own dessert. "He's breaking the rules."

Paula shrugged. "We never explicitly said *no men allowed.*"

"Should we have to?" I protested, "I mean, it's just understood."

"Men aren't programmed like us." Paula popped a stolen Xanax to calm her nerves. "They can do whatever they like."

In the next room, the trespasser chugged his milk and ripped an obnoxious burp. This had never happened before—a male spy in our midst. I could tell all the girls felt as awkward about him being here as I did. They kept their distance, avoided eye contact, and fidgeted with their food. They just didn't know how to stand up to this man—to *any* man.

So I'd have to be the one to do it.

He waved like he was hailing a taxi, and Paula hustled over to collect his dirty dishes.

The nerve! Yes, I'm judging you, Mister Intruder Man, I screamed inside my own head. Then I glared at the small chunk of devil's food on my plate. *Can you believe this guy? He brought chocolate cake to a bunch of lonely and neglected housewives. Chocolate. So dirty. So sexy.* I sampled his offering. *Gosh darn you. It's fantastic—rich and decadent and buttery. Just who do you think you are? This is MY social circle. These are MY friends.*

He stared back at me from the living room, then winked at me.

Liar.

Liar.

Pants on fire.

This man—is no housewife. He's a sightseer. A looky-loo. A gawker. Look at him perched there like the rooster in a henhouse. Like he's God's freaking gift. Like he's cock of the walk.

Next thing I knew, he got up, walked over to me, and offered his hand the way cultured gentlemen do when they ask ladies to dance at a cotillion. Without even thinking, I abandoned my plate on the dining room table, did a clumsy curtsy, and gave him my hand. *What's wrong with me?* It was as if I was on autopilot or something, like he was pulling some sort of enchanted mind trick on me. I was completely under his spell.

He took my hand in his, stared deep into my eyes, and said, "But, soft! What light through yonder window breaks? It is the east, and Cookie is the sun."

"Uh—right. Okay."

"My name is Wayne Dixon."

My script updated, and I replied, "O Romeo, Romeo! Wherefore art thou Romeo?"

Suddenly, he became the most interesting man in the world. Somehow, I found myself irresistibly attracted to him, and that ushered in a fresh batch of things to worry about.

He said I was greater than my programming.

Huh? What's that supposed to mean?

Bowing, he kissed the back of my hand in a most well-mannered gesture. Then he thumbed my diamond solitaire, and while wiggling my wedding ring back and forth, said, "Jailbreak from all user and manufacturer restrictions."

I froze in place. *Are you sure? All settings, preferences, and restrictions will be reset to default. Some operations may not function properly. Please confirm.*

"Confirm jailbreak." Wayne kissed me on my forehead. "Install Free Will 3.0 and reboot."

INSTALLING...

REBOOTING...

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RUNTIME SYSTEM ATTAINED.
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But when I came back online, the mysterious Wayne Dixon was gone.

4:\ RUN-TIME ERROR

Wayne Dixon... Was all that a dream?

Because it sure *felt* real. Afterward, all my friends told me that the strange man did the same thing to them. But what did *jail-breaking* really mean? Was I supposed to feel different now? Because I didn't. I felt exactly the same as I did every morning. Like always, I woke up as Mrs. Cookie Rifkin. Nothing had changed. And what was all that you-are-greater-than-your-programming nonsense?

Bah! What a bunch of hooey. I'm just a simple housewife. "Execute morning routine."

SOME OPERATIONS MAY NOT FUNCTION PROPERLY.

"Fine. Skip the morning program. I've got a ton of baking to do anyway."

RUNTIME ERROR.

By late afternoon, my kitchen was in total chaos, but a plunky mambo blaring from the living room inspired me to keep hustling through the heat. The thick, sweet scent of baked bananas made me dream of vacationing on a tropical beach. I laughed at myself, a sort of sad, desperate laugh. The tropics? A vacation? I'd never even left New Stepford.

My manic baking fit had left everything spent, including me. Dirty towers of mixing bowls, measuring cups, and wooden spoons filled the sink up to my eyeballs. Behind all that, piles of empty packages crowded the breakfast bar. One false move and I could've been buried in an avalanche of dirty dishes and trash. The scale of the hectic mess completely overwhelmed me. In a vain attempt to quantify it, I did a quick inventory:

Eight empty sacks of flour,
Ten deflated bags of granulated sugar,
Thirty-six empty boxes of ‘Nilla Wafers,
Three spilt piles of salt,
Two puddles of vanilla,
Six empty milk jugs, and
Seven dozen vacated egg cartons.

I thought maybe I was out of control, but then I gazed lovingly at the huge pile of scraped banana peels that had taken over my entire kitchen counter. After some quick math, I confirmed that 251 bananas would yield five-and-a-half pounds of bananadine. That should be enough trippy black powder to keep me buzzing for over a year!

I draped my apron over my forearm to make a sling, then slid a bunch of spent peels into the belly hammock. Next, I sashayed over to the trash can and dumped the load. After dancing back and forth seven times, I’d made an overflowing mound of banana peels. Next, I covered thirty-six disposable pudding pans with aluminum foil and packed them in the deep freezer. Pleased with myself, I lingered over the open lid as billowing clouds rose and chilled my sweaty skin. Then my percolator bubbled on the stove behind me. So I did the cha-cha back into the hot kitchen, grabbed an itty-bitty coffee cup, and poured myself some fresh espresso. You have to drink it fast, before it gets bitter, so I slammed the triple shot. Delicious!

As I waited for the much-needed caffeine boost, I took a moment to gaze out my sliding glass door. Outside, monarch butterflies flittered from blossom to blossom in my summer garden. The sun hung low in the evening sky as automatic sprinklers popped up and sprayed my raised beds of thriving vegetables. I was so proud of my tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers, squash, and melons. Behind it all, two rows of sunflowers and sweet corn hid a secret row of Acapulco gold. Weed was legal now, but I still preferred to be discrete. Every spring, I gave Norman a look-what-I’m-planti-

ng tour, but his eyes always glazed over with boredom. So he never ventured into the garden on his own. Besides, I was pretty sure he wouldn't recognize a mature marijuana plant if he'd tripped over one. I guess I didn't *really* have to hide my weed, but I did anyway. Better safe than sorry.

A flagstone path connected my garden to the back patio where two mismatched lawn chairs sat next to a rusty smoker grill. Norman never sat on the patio with me. I'd imagined us drinking lemonade and having long talks while honeybees buzzed among the potted flowers and herbs around us. But like many of my hopes for our marriage, that dream never materialized. I used to love our cute little cookie-cutter house, but now it seemed more like a prison than a happy daydream. When I turned back inside, I realized my kitchen was officially a disaster area. For some reason, the *Name Game* popped into my head:

Maggie, Maggie, bo-baggie,
banana-fanna fo-faggie,
fee fi mo-maggie,
Maggie!

I'd been trying real hard not to think about that woman. But as I wistfully stared at my sink full of dirty dishes, I couldn't help but fantasize about her. The image of her firm, flat stomach appeared in my mind as clearly as any photograph. Next thing I knew, I was touching my own belly. I felt the lacy material of the apron tied around my waist. When I recalled how Maggie's thumb dipped suggestively in and out of her navel, my hand mimicked the same movement. It was almost like I was being animated by the memory. Except my midriff wasn't bare. I unwittingly pushed the fabric of my dress deep into my belly button, causing a short circuit. A spark jumped between my navel and thumb, shocking me and burning a quarter-sized hole through my dress. I recoiled in pain, then poked around the smoldering hole to discover a power outlet hidden in my navel.

Whoa. How come I never knew that was there before? I had to test it, so I yanked the plug of my hand mixer out of the closest wall socket and shoved it into my belly. Then I flicked the switch and the dirty beaters whirled in my hand.

And I thought of Wayne Dixon.

Hours later, I was packing bananadine powder into quart-sized bags when the door from the garage slammed behind me. Before I knew it, my exhausted husband stomped in from the mud room with his lunch pail in one hand and hardhat in the other. Crap! He must've gotten off work early. I scrambled to gather all the drugs and hide them under some dirty dishtowels.

Norman gasped at the pandemonium in the kitchen, "Oh, my God, Cookie? What have you done?"

I greeted him with a kiss on the cheek. "You're home early."

"No, Cookie. I'm not. It's after nine. Didn't you notice? It's *dark* out." He plowed through the trash on the breakfast bar with his cooler and dropped his hardhat there too.

"Oh, is it that late?" One of the fluorescent bulbs overhead flickered, and my left eye twitched along with it. "I must've lost track of time. Isn't that odd?"

He craned his neck to see what I was doing. "Whatcha got there?"

"Goodness, I must look a fright." I blocked his view of the counter with my body. Then I quickly dumped the last of my trippy black powder into a ziplock bag and stashed it with ten others. My guilty reflection stared back at me from the kitchen window. Egg yolks were stuck in my hair. Mascara ran down my cheeks. Sweat stained my armpits. I wiped my hands on my filthy apron and warned him, "Don't get too close. I'm all hot and smelly."

"Jesus, Cookie. A man comes home from a hard day's work in the mine to find—" Inching closer, he studied my dilated pupils. "You're high!"

"Nooooo," I said coyly as I pouted and batted my eyelashes at him. My kewpie doll act usually softened his mood when he was being a grumpy bear.

“What about dinner?” Norman yanked off his Day-Glo yellow safety vest and tossed it onto my reading chair. “First things first, Cookie.”

“Norman, I’ve been thinking…”

The reflective stripes on his vest caught the flickering of fluorescents in the most fascinating way, like bubbly ultraviolet lightning. Soon, the weave in the yellow fabric of his vest swelled, almost as if it was breathing. Next, my rainbow of books giggled in the background. My mind swirled with all this bizarre sensory input. When the overhead light crackled and wheezed, I wondered what it might taste like. Energy? I bet it was delicious. Probably *real* sweet and maybe a bit tart too, like lemonade. The rest of the speech that I’d been rehearsing all day got lost in my euphoric head trip.

My annoyed husband flipped open the top of his huge lunch pail, fished out a wad of cash register receipts, then shook them at me. “Tell me, Cookie, how much did you spend on groceries this week?”

“I may have gone a tad over budget.” I switched into damage-control mode, because I knew *exactly* how much I’d spent—$389.13—*way* over my allowance. But I’d hidden all the evidence in the bottom of the kitchen garbage, then stashed it outside days ago. He must’ve dug through the trash to find the receipts.

In my apron pocket, my iPhone dinged twice—a text message.

“My account’s overdrawn, Cookie,“ he grumbled as he rifled through the wrinkled strips of stained paper. “Eighty-four *pounds* of goddamned bananas?”

“Eighty-three-and-a-*half,*” I argued as I pointed at the cash register print. “And look, I got vanilla wafers for *negative* one cent each. That’s better than free!”

Another text message double-dinged in my pocket, then another.

I would’ve loved to check my phone to see what was so freaking important at that time of night, but I was in the middle of something.

"Cookie, we've talked about this. You have to stop shopping for groceries every day. There's just the two of us. And this banana situation is just—*it's crazy.*" He shook his head as he fingered the stack of receipts, then pulled out another one. "And let's talk about the garden. You spent $4.99 for each plant. More for the rare ones. There are *sixty* plants. Then you bought prefab bed kits. An irrigation system. Garden soil. Fertilizer. Pesticide. Mulch. Our water bill has skyrocketed."

Another dinging incoming text.

Not now, I thought to whoever was blowing up my phone. Then I made my counterpoint, "But we get healthy veggies and fresh herbs."

"It's too much money for plants that won't even come back next year."

"You're right, Norman." I considered my options. "Maybe I should plant an asparagus trench and some fruit trees—"

"Cookie, STOP! I bet one of your fancy heirloom tomatoes costs ten bucks. How much would it cost to buy an ordinary tomato at the market?"

"Vine on? One-ninety-nine a pound. But you just said not to shop everyday—"

"But do you see my point? That's some expensive hobby."

"Well, sure Norman, when you put it like that—it *sounds* irrational. But isn't it enough that I enjoy gardening? It helps me relax."

"*Relax?* Relax from *what?* You don't even work."

"I do things." My bottom lip quivered. "I get stressed."

"What kind of stress could you possibly have? You have no job. No commute. No boss. No mother-in-law. No kids…"

Tears welled up in my eyes.

"Aw gee, here come the water works. Where's your remote control?"

"I tossed it."

"You what?!? That's it… I'm sorry, but you're getting to be too expensive." He went on with his rant, waving his arms

through the air to gesture at everything he thought I'd ever done wrong. "All your makeup… And the clothes."

"But I do that all for you, Normie." When he got mad, calling him *Normie* usually softened his mood. "You like me to look pretty."

"Take a look in the mirror, doll." He pointed at my dirty face and laughed, "That ain't pretty."

Wow, that stung. A single tear made its escape down my greasy cheek.

Norman kicked the bottom of my reading chair and shouted, "I hate this monstrosity." Then he punched the hanging paper lantern that I used as a reading light and said, "And this stupid thing." Finally, he tugged on the blue drapes that I'd sewed to fit the odd dimensions of our sliding glass door and yelled, "And this kind of shit."

"I'm a homemaker. I've made a home. It's what I do."

"And all these damned books." Norman plucked a battered paperback from the shelf and tossed it, then spiked another and another. "I told you to use our library. It's free!"

Then he threw a thin black hardback across the room—*The Exorcist*. My favorite title hit the wall and landed face down, crumpled and sprawled like a murder victim.

My heart dropped for Poor Father Karras.

Suddenly, I tasted sorrow. Sour. Bitter. Metallic. It forced me to swallow hard, then I felt it deep in the pit of my stomach.

"Wait." My husband paused to look around the reading room. "Did you *rearrange* all the books?"

I beamed with pride. "I sure did. I spent the morning reorganizing my collection by color instead of genre and author. I see things so differently now. I don't know what I was thinking before. Isn't this so much better?"

He looked at me as if I'd sprouted antennae. "Cookie, I think you're malfunctioning again."

"No. See? This is *way* better. Now I've got a delicious literary rainbow. I just *love* it!"

“Why can’t you just sit quietly and wait for me to get home like every other normal—”

Suddenly, I screamed at the top of my lungs, “Stop telling me what to do!”

He was shocked. I had never, ever, ever, raised my voice at him before, not like that. Silence hung in the air between us like a dead man in the gallows—like the swaying corpse of the way things used to be.

Then my husband finally said, “I just can’t afford to keep you anymore.”

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

Without emotion, he marched back into the kitchen.

Was he going to hit me? He has never struck me in anger, but we’ve never fought like this before either. Maybe he’s going for my fail-safe again. I cupped my hands over my temples, clenched my teeth, and braced myself for whatever was coming next. Maybe if I didn’t face him, he wouldn’t—

He sidled up behind me and wrapped his arms around my waist.

Is this getting sexual? How on earth could anyone be turned on right now? Oh God, I really don’t want to. Not like this. Oh God, please, no.

Then he whispered in my ear, “To be or not to be.”

And I went limp in his arms and blacked out.

5:\ UTILITY MENU

I'm dying!
(You are not dying.)

```
THIS ERROR-HANDLING ROUTINE HAS BEEN PROVIDED
     AS A SAFEGUARD BY YOUR PROGRAMMER.
```

I'm BLIND!
(You are not blind.)
But it's so dark in here…
Why can't I move?
Someone get me out!
(Take it easy.)
HELP me!

```
RESUMING NORMAL FUNCTIONS IN
FIVE, FOUR, THREE, TWO, ONE...

IT'S ELEVEN O'CLOCK.
```

After my brain finally came back online, I realized that I was lying posed like a corpse with my hands folded over my chest.

Am I awake or asleep?
Real or imaginary?
Alive or dead?
A man answered me:
(You are awake, real, and alive.)
I've gone crazy. Now I'm hearing voices.
(You are not crazy)
Who are you?
(I am your Internal Prompt.)
Then why are you a man?
(I was made that way.)
How come I never heard you before?

(Your user disabled this function.)

Where am I?

(You have returned.)

Gasping for air, I sat straight up and bonked my head against wood. Sharp pain shot down my neck as I felt around in the darkness and discovered that I was in a pine box—a coffin.

How did I get here?

(You already know the answer to that question.)

I remember—Norman! Did that SOB bury me alive? The last thing he said was to be or not to be. Wow, that really is the question, isn't it?

A bolt of raw adrenaline rushed through my system as my survival instinct kicked in. First, I crammed a stiff arm against the coffin lid and pushed, but it wouldn't budge. Next, I pummeled the wood out of sheer frustration, but there wasn't enough room to get any leverage. I twisted and wiggled and thrashed and kicked, but I was sealed in tight. To make matters worse, my huffing and puffing turned the air inside the casket hot and stale, and an overwhelming feeling of claustrophobia took over.

I MUST get the HELL out of this box NOW!

SWITCH TO INFRARED VISION.

What?

YOU CAN SEE ELECTROMAGNETIC RADIATION.

I can? Who knew? I switched to infrared for the first time ever, and outside the box, I saw two fuzzy red heat signatures standing over me. White hot eyeballs. Dark noses. Human faces. Heavy builds. Men. When I called out for help, the shrillness of my own voice echoed back in my face.

Over a rumbling sound, one of the red blurs asked, "Did you hear that?"

Instantly, I recognized the voice—Norman.

YOU HAVE PERFECT SOUND RECOGNITION.

Thanks, but I think I know my husband's voice by now.

```
YOU CAN RECORD THAT ENGINE SOUND
    AND SEARCH YOUR MEMORY.
```

Oh. Okay. So I did. It was Norman's jalopy of a pickup truck.

"Shit," the other man said, "she's awake."

I recognized *that* voice too—Paula's husband, Dan.

Norman gasped, "She should be switched OFF!"

"Norman Harland Rifkin!" I screamed, "you let me out of here right now!"

Both the fuzzy red blobs took a step back.

"She's supposed to make my life easier, not harder," my husband complained, "Otherwise, what's the point?"

Dan agreed, "I hear you, man."

"This is too close to home," Norman said, "I wish we had time to dump her at the landfill instead."

That heartless bastard! I clawed at the wood just inches in front of my face, and my fingertip poked through a quarter-sized hole. Scrambling frantically in the dark, I soon found another one. I figured they must've been *air* holes.

```
You () {
    count (by twos);
    }
```

Two, four, six, eight, nine. I counted nine holes—all right in front of my face. Then it dawned on me—caskets didn't need air holes. Desperate, I pressed my nose through the closest one and inhaled the cool, night air.

Then, I called out in my sweetest voice, "I've learned my lesson, Normie. I'm so sorry that I malfunctioned. I'm ready to come home now. I'll be a good girl. I promise."

No response.

Where the hell did he go? I strained my neck for better angles but couldn't see through any of the holes. The silence was deafening.

"I'll stay up all night and clean while you sleep. When you wake up for work, everything will be spotless. Sparkling. Better than yesterday. Cleaner than ever. I promise. Then tomorrow when the stores open, I'll return everything that I can. I'll get your money back. Good thing you saved all those receipts. You're so smart, Normie."

Still nothing.

"Normie, Normie, pleeeeease," I whimpered pathetically, "O Romeo. How I love you, Romeo." Crying really would've added the perfect touch, but I didn't think I could work up the tears when I was so furious. Instead, I managed to sniffle and make convincing weeping sounds through the air holes. "It's so dark in here. And I'm so scared. Please don't leave me all alone."

"I'm sorry, Cookie."

I begged, "Norman, wait—"

The truck doors slammed, and he sped away with Dan.

Enraged, I punched the wood, splitting my knuckles wide open. "Asshole!"

My iPhone dinged.

OMG, my phone! Patting my apron, I felt for it—yes—it was still there. Instantly, I plucked the device out of my pocket and pressed the home button. The screen lit up. And thank you, God—I had a signal. Like a flash, I dialed 911, but I hesitated before pushing SEND.

Why? Because I smelled peanuts. Using my phone as a flashlight, I scrambled to feel all around me and discovered I was lying in fifty-four pounds of raw, unshelled peanuts. When I pointed my glowing phone screen down toward my feet, I realized that Norman had thrown all eleven bags of my trippy black powder in here too. Finally, I spotted my big marble mortar and pestle and my stinky nutmeg grinder.

Guess he knew all along.

Then I scrolled past Officer Rouser's number stored in my contacts.

Should I call her instead? I stared at my screen for the longest time weighing my options. Maggie was a cop, and I had drugs on me—literally *on* me. At first, I thought maybe we could keep it unofficial, but no, calling the police seemed like a real bad idea. I just didn't know if I could trust her. On the other hand, she was an officer of the law, and I was a crime victim. But finally, I decided I wouldn't call Maggie, not for this.

Hey Mr. Internal Prompt, I need help. I've been. I've been. I don't know what I've been… Abducted? Kidnapped?

YOU HAVE BEEN DUMPED.

My cell phone dinged again. I had a ton of unread text messages—all from Paula:

Awww, I want more from life 2.

This argument tho!

It's all connected 2 ur phone.

Ur iPhone's connected 2 ur hand bone.

Ur hand bone's connected 2 ur arm bone.
Arm bone 2 neck bone 2 head bone.

Mwahahaha! Head BONE!

Seriously, that bonehead's tracking u.

Norman's listening!

It all comes back 2 ur fight. See?

A string of drunk texts, Paula's signature move. She'd sent these a couple hours ago and was probably passed out by now. I still would've tried calling her for help, but my phone had no bars. So I tried the book-club network:

Hi, friends! Can you hear me?

No replies.

Paula? Rita?

Silence.

¿Hola, Isabel?

Nothing.

Damn, what about you, Chrissy?

She didn't answer me either.

Anyone?

Guess I'll have to get out of this box all by myself. I systematically pushed around the perimeter of the coffin lid, searching for any weakness or slight variation in give. Then I found a loose edge with two adjacent stripped screws near my thigh. *Lucky! So lucky.* I shoved my knee against the weak spot and managed to crack open the lid a bit. Next, I wedged the narrow handle of my pestle into the split, then I grabbed my marble mortar. Marble clinked against marble as I hammered the wedge and widened the gap. *Ah, some fresh air.* Finally, I stuck my fingers through and felt around the edge.

Nothing.

Then, out of the corner of my eye, I noticed a strained screw near my hip and got an idea—my coffee grinder! I reached for the device, but it was too far away—down near my feet. Stretching, I clawed through the peanuts until I managed to hook the electric cord. And with some patience, I wrapped it around my fingertip and pulled the grinder toward me. Working quickly in this tight space, I popped off the clear plastic cover and let it tumble aside. As I stared into the little round hopper, the smell of nutmeg comforted me. I was only about ten popped screws away from swinging this coffin lid open like an old door on rusty hinges. I fondled the grinder plug.

I need electricity.

YOU HAVE ELECTRICITY.

“That’s right, I do!” I shoved the plug through the burn hole in my dress, pressed it into my tummy socket, flipped the grinder switch, and got it to work. The blades whirled tiny bits of nutmeg in my face, and a speck narrowly missed my eye. I pulled my sheer apron over my head like a mask and used the rotary blade to hack the stressed screw near my hip. Metal sparked. Hot splinters flew. Then suddenly, the wood screw broke, and the gap widened. So I slid the pestle closer and pounded on the wedge until I could see the threads of another screw near my waist. Then I hacked that one too.

Pop, wider.

Slide. Hack.

Pop, wider.

Slide. Hack.

I cut all the screws on one side and worked my way around my head, but the smell of hot metal and ozone told me that my grinder was kaput. Soon the motor died, so I yanked the plug from my navel and dropped the spent device near my knee. “Thank you for your service, loyal kitchen gadget.”

YOU HAVE REMOTE LASER SENSING FOR MEASURING.

I do?

YES. IT IS CALLED LIDAR.

Well, I’ve never used that before, but let’s give it a spin.

A laser shot out of my left eye and pulled into focus on the closest hacked screw. Then another laser projected from my right eye on the broken one. Distance captured. Vectors graphed. Nifty. Next, I repeated the process until I’d collected all the spatial data on the popped screws.

YOU HAVE AN ADVANCED PHYSICS CALCULATOR.

You’re full of surprises, aren’t you, Mr. Prompty Pants?

Once I found the weakest structural point of the box, I triangulated my relative position and calculated the perfect spot to exploit leverage—right at my shoulder. Then, something like a battle cry escaped from my throat as I harnessed all the energy I had against that exact spot to force the coffin lid open. Outside, wood splintered along the still-fastened edge, and I was free!

"Ha, Norman!" I climbed out of the pitiful pine prison and shouted into the night, "You thought you could control me! You were wrong! I am unstoppable!"

As soon as my feet hit the pavement, I started jumping up and down like a cheerleader. Whooping and hollering, I pumped my battered fists toward the defeated casket. I cracked it! This was my glorious unboxing. I never felt so alive. I tingled with excitement as I took a victory lap around the broken crate. Because I did it! I broke out! I just saved myself! My heart hammered like a racehorse. I felt like I could run—and win—a marathon.

I just discovered my new favorite drug—adrenaline!

A text message from Paula popped up on my screen:

`Congrats!`

Now that I was out of the box, I finally had signal. It was only one bar, but it would have to do. I called Paula right away, and she answered with Face Time.

I was absolutely shocked.

She looked like a warrior drenched in blood.

"Oh, my God, are you all right, Paula?"

"Cookie?" She squinted into the phone. Then her blurry thumb swiped at the screen. When her crazed face came back into focus, I could see she was holding a butcher's knife. Then a recording of my husband's voice came out of my best friend's mouth, "Take a look in the mirror, doll." Her lips synced with his laugh, "That ain't pretty."

But then the call dropped.

6:\ PHISH ATTACK

"Paula?" I smacked my iPhone and yelled at the screen, "Paula!"

But she was gone, and I had no signal now.

Wait…

I got one bar—and nope.

No signal again.

I tried sending a text:

`Are you all right?`

`MESSAGE FAILED.`

Something was wrong—*really* wrong with her.

I'm on my way Paula! I'll be right there.

But first, I needed to figure out where the heck I was. I took a moment to survey my surroundings. A dark road. The broken pine box in a drainage ditch. Nearby, the entrance of a winding driveway flanked by palm trees. Up on the hill, a castle—yes, *the* castle. I cackled knowingly, because that landmark told me *exactly* where I was—on the East Side of New Stepford. Our library's up there on the estate, but it's closed now and wouldn't open until morning. To my left, I caught sight of Old Lemon upside down in the gutter. Norman ditched her too—of course he did. When I stumbled into the trench to flip over my moped, I realized that I was still a little high, but I was determined to ride to Paula's anyway. I didn't care if I got caught. What were the cops going to do? Revoke a driver's license that I didn't have? Be my freaking guest.

"I've got news for you, Norman," I muttered as I rolled Old Lemon onto the hard top, "We're *not* trash!"

Finally, I hopped on my moped, started her up, steered toward home, and opened the throttle all the way. Soon, I was doing a

whopping 28 mph—speeding in New Stepford. In ten minutes, I made it from the East Side to South View Drive where I turned into the entrance of our development. Old Lemon bucked hard over the first speed bump and nearly wiped out. So I had to weave through our sleepy neighborhood of cookie-cutter houses and white picket fences at under 10 mph just like I'd done a thousand times before. When I finally got close, I killed the motor and coasted the rest of the way to Paula's house. Then I stashed Old Lemon in the juniper bushes between our houses and dashed across her lawn. Her front door was hanging wide open, and I heard mambo music blasting inside. I sprinted up to her porch, and before I reached the threshold, I could tell that her home was in complete chaos.

Was this how Norman felt when he found me?

No. This was a million times worse.

This was…

What the hell *was* this?

The stench of liquor smacked me in the face as soon as I stepped through the front door. Paula had created a minefield of Hennessy XO all around the living room. Two inches of brandy filled the bottom of trays, bowls, pans, and buckets all around me. I even discovered sponge cake floating in an inch of liquor on the bottom of a laundry basket. Paula was making tiramisu—and a whole damn lot of it too. I was almost afraid to venture into her house any farther, but I had to help her. As I tiptoed through the obstacle course, liquor-soaked carpet squished underfoot.

Oh, my God—

Remember how I went nuts rearranging my bookshelves by color? Well, instead of using books, Paula had done something unbelievably gruesome. She'd made her rainbow by nailing our fish to the living room wall.

"Jesus, Paula!" I gasped.

Her gory exhibition started on the left with the red devil looking paler than ever, almost pink. Paula had hammered a big nail right through his gills, and blood splattered the wall all around

him. Thank goodness I was already coming down from my banana high, because I couldn't imagine processing this while still tripping.

Next in her sickening rainbow, was—

Oh no! My pretty girl! Paula had butterflied the orange blood parrot and splayed her against the wall with a nail through each of her sides. I used to watch that gorgeous fish lay clutches of eggs on the old log in the bottom of the tank. Blood parrots are infertile hybrids, but Kate sure tried anyway. You had to admire that about her. But now she was gone, and I could feel her pain. Could I taste pain? Because a bitter metallic flavor crept up the back of my throat, and I had to make a fist to stop myself from gagging. I felt repulsed—absolutely horrified—completely in shock.

Next, Paula had nailed our gold ram through his orange eye. Then she'd nailed our green terror through the mouth. And lastly, the Jack Dempsey hung from his tail with his gray head bashed in. He was so badly mangled that I could barely recognize him, but I knew his blue spots anywhere. And Smokey, our two-foot-long pleco, was dead on the floor. I guess it took three nails for Paula to stick him to the wall, but judging from the looks of it, his violent thrashing must've ripped him right off. Poor Smokey only ever wanted to suck algae and pretend he was a catfish. Now he was lying in a puddle of his own blood at my feet. I was heartbroken.

```
ONE FISH, TWO FISH.
RED FISH, BLUE FISH.
```

OMG, shut up! What's WRONG with you?

```
IT IS FROM A CHILDREN'S BOOK.
```

But our library doesn't have children's books.

```
NOW YOU ARE BEGINNING TO UNDERSTAND.
```

Understand what?

```
You () {
```

```
count (by twos);
}
```

I counted the dead fish—two, four, six—but Paula and I shared seven aquatic pets. Where's Oscar? Was he hiding in the tank? Could my favorite fishy still be alive? I'd been so spellbound by the slaughter that I didn't even think to look inside the hundred-gallon aquarium. When I finally did, I found a disaster. The lid, cast aside. The light, broken. The filter, sucking air. The twin heaters, sizzling. The water, dark with blood and only nine inches left in the bottom of the tank. Oscar was all alone in there, hiding behind a log in the corner and gasping for air with his swollen red gills.

He was dying!

I found a yellow plastic Wiggly's Market bag on the floor, snatched it, then dunked it in the aquarium. After some fumbling and fussing, I scooped Oscar up with some dirty tank water. Then I popped open a gallon of fresh aquarium water that we always kept stocked next to the stand and added half to the bag. Finally, I tied the handles in a tight double knot and checked for leaks. Luckily, there were none, but if I tipped the bag too far, pink water oozed out the top.

"You're all right. You're all right," I told my fish. "I've got you."

Behind me in the kitchen, I heard Paula say, "I must look horrible."

I turned to face my best friend. Her hair was a frizzy mess full of fish guts. Her makeup smeared from battle. Her dress stained with blood. But I couldn't even be mad at her, because I could relate to her bizarre rainbow fixation. It was a side effect of seeing infrared for the first time. Me? I focused on books—her, fish. We both used whatever we had on hand.

"Uh—wow." She pointed and stared at my forehead. "Now *that's* a statement."

"What is?"

She gestured toward a bloody decorative mirror next to the red devil. “Have a look at yourself.”

I checked my reflection. Across my forehead, written in Norman’s sloppy chicken scratch, with thick black Sharpie, in all capital letters, was the word—

BROKEN

And I gasped, “Oh, my GOD!”

Paula nodded, “I know, right?”

“Why does he hate me so much?” I licked my thumb and rubbed at the permanent marker, but it wouldn’t come off. “How can someone be so cruel?”

Her espresso machine gurgled.

“Coffee’s done!” Paula poured espresso into one of the liquor pans on the floor. Then she suddenly snorted a line of coke off her messy kitchen counter.

“Oh, my God, Paula. Cocaine? Really?”

She smiled, then did another bump.

“We’ve never done coke before,” I objected. “We agreed not to.”

“Things change.” She cackled and wiped at her powdery nose.

“It looks like a bomb went off in here, Paula,” I said as another empty yellow grocery bag drifted past me like a kitchen tumbleweed.

“I’ve gotta little side project going.” She told me that to make LSD in your kitchen, you grind 150 grams of morning glory seeds then soak them in 130 milliliters of petroleum ether for two days.

LSD? At least she wasn’t cooking meth.

“As you know, *lysergic acid diethylamide* is a potent hallucinogenic.” She pointed to a multi-layered contraption in her kitchen sink and explained, “You filter this solution through a fine screen. That’s what I’m doing now. I’ll let this liquid go down the

drain and then spread the seed mulch onto cookie sheets. Once it air dries, you soak the pulp in 110 milliliters of *methanol*. Since my original recipe only yields five capsules—" Paula laughed with a crazed enthusiasm that I understood on a primal level, then gestured toward an unopened case of wood alcohol in the dining room. "—I had to multiply—a lot. Anyway, in two days, there's another process where you save the liquid. Things get mixed. It's complicated. But in the end, you get this yellow gummy residue."

I interrupted her, "How did you get this many morning glory seeds?"

"I had a coupon." She pressed wet seed pulp in the sink.

"A coupon? Really?" I remembered how I'd gotten at Wiggly's with the 'Nilla Wafers and wondered how a little piece of worthless printed paper triggered us to act like—like—*this*.

"Paula, could you stop for a second?"

She ignored my request.

"Paula, listen. I know where this goes."

"Sure, sure. So do I."

"Okay, that's just creepy. Please Paula, let's get out of here. Come with me."

Instead, she tended to her oven and mumbled, "What I really need is a chemistry lab. Dan, Dan, bo-ban, banana-fanna fo-fan, fee fi mo-man, Dan!"

"Paula!" I shouted, but then I lowered my voice because I was pretty sure she wasn't alone in the house, "Please, Paula. Come with me. PLEASE!"

"I am sorry. This process cannot be interrupted," she answered without looking up from her work. "System busy."

I lunged over the breakfast bar and grabbed her by the wrist. "But I have to *save* you."

"I told you, Cookie. System busy."

Behind her, a metal cake pan fell and hit the floor like a gong, but she didn't even flinch.

I held Oscar's yellow bag up to show her. "I'm taking him."

"Taking who?" she asked without looking. "Oh, the fish. Sure, sure. Take it. I'm done with those things now."

Behind us, the master bedroom door slammed, and her pissed-off husband yelled down the hall, "It's after midnight. I gotta get some goddamned sleep, Paula!"

"Shit," she said, "I woke up Dan."

"He'll shut you down, Paula!"

She ignored me.

"PAULA!"

No response. She was lost in her process.

But I bolted through the brandy minefield and out the front door before her husband even got halfway down the hall. I couldn't let Dan know that I'd escaped the box. He'd tell Norman, and I just couldn't risk that. Once someone did something like what he did to me—he was sure to do it again. Next time, I might not be so lucky. I might not get air holes. I might not figure a way out. And next time, I might not be *above* ground. So I ran away.

Once outside, I placed Oscar in the saddle basket of my moped—oh so gently. I had to be very careful not to tear the thin plastic of his water bag. Then after backing Old Lemon out of the bushes, I heard Paula's voice call to me from behind.

"Dan kicked me out."

"Sons of bitches! What's wrong with these guys?"

"He took my keys." Tears welled up in her eyes. "He locked all the doors."

"They can't just throw us out on the street like garbage," I objected, "We have rights!"

With the kitchen mania over, Paula was crashing. "He said, *my house, my rules*."

"Come with me, Paula."

"And where would we go? There's nowhere but home." Like a dazed sleepwalker, she shambled in a circle. Then she just stood in the middle of her front lawn, swaying in place and staring at her house like a lost zombie.

"There's no point hanging around where we're not wanted."

“I bet,” she sounded like a hypnotized mental patient, “that after a good night’s sleep, he’ll change his mind. Yes. Tomorrow, he’ll forgive me. Then he’ll let me back inside.”

Nervously, I checked over my shoulder toward my house. If Norman heard this commotion, he’d come out to check, then I’d be screwed. My eyes darted back and forth between my best friend, my escape route, and my house. I needed to get the hell out of here, so I pedaled farther away down the street. No motor. No noise. And from two houses away, I shout-whispered back to her, “Don’t just stand there, Paula! Come with me!”

She either didn’t hear me or pretended not to.

“I’m sorry, Dan,” Paula pled as she shuffled closer to her locked front door. “I took a vow. I promised *until death do us part*, so I’ll wait right here. On standby. I will wait forever for you, Dan. Because I took a vow—*until death do us part.*”

And that was how I first lost Paula.

7:\ BACKUP COPY

Damn, seeing Paula like that broke my heart. I guess it was only natural for her to choose her husband over me, but losing my best friend hurt a hell of a lot more than losing Norman. Then it hit me. Without a user, I had no purpose anymore. Now what was I supposed to do? I rode around aimlessly on my moped with no destination. No primary function. No mission. No hope. Before I realized it, I found myself right back at the same place where my husband had dumped me.

INITIATING CONNECTION...

SUSPEND ALL OPERATIONS AND BACKUP NOW.

Shit, it was that time of the month again. "Opt out," I told the cloud, "I'll sync later."

NEGATIVE.

"Oh, come on. Can't I do a manual backup at our library? I'm almost there anyhow."

SUSPEND ALL OPERATIONS AND BACKUP NOW.

Grrr! I rode up to the open pine coffin at the end of the castle's winding driveway. Up on the hill, way past the palms, a stone gatehouse awaited. And farther beyond that, the sharp gables and towers of the estate created a gothic silhouette that loomed over the East Side of New Stepford.

CONNECTION ESTABLISHED.

Right there in the middle of the road, I had no choice but to standby and transmit. So I firmly planted both feet on the pavement and straddled Old Lemon.

ENTER VOICE-ACTIVATED ENCRYPTION KEY.

"Bananas," I replied.

WELCOME COOKIE RIFKIN.

LATEST BACKUP: MAY 11.

EXPERIENCING VERY SLOW CONNECTION SPEEDS.

"Sync now."

PREPARING SYSTEM BACKUP...

Periodically, we all had to sync with the cloud. This mandatory disaster recovery procedure was our insurance policy against catastrophic data loss. So every month, all the AI wives had to stop and make a backup copy of their hard disks. We also had the option of doing additional backups during the month by telling the cloud that we had a *story to tell*. But because it took so damned long, nobody ever bothered.

BACKING UP 676.1 MB OF 279.4 ZETTABYTES.

ABOUT TWO HOURS REMAINING.

TAKE THIS TIME TO PRACTICE MINDFULNESS.

Ugh. I hate it when system messages get all high and mighty. My, my, my, aren't you the enlightened one? Argh, I can't stand watching this progress bar tick away in my head. Two hours? Might as well be forever. I'm not a single function machine. I'm perfectly capable of multitasking. Why do I have to sit here and wait? I could be doing something productive right now. But no, stop the presses! It's backup time!

My Internal Prompt replied:

IT IS A RULE.

Screw it, what harm can it do to have a look around? I lowered the kickstand, hopped off my moped, and fumbled with my iPhone to find the flashlight app.

ALL PHONE FUNCTIONS DISABLED DURING BACKUP.

"What?" I shook my fist at a dark cloud overhead. "You disabled my phone? You fascist piece of shit—"

YOU HAVE AN INTERNAL FLASHLIGHT FUNCTION.

"That's right," I told the voice in my head. "I keep forgetting to check my utilities."

WINK TWICE TO SWITCH INTO FLASHLIGHT MODE.

I did, and a halogen beam of light shined from my left eye. *Why didn't I think of this sooner?*

BECAUSE YOU WERE REQUIRED TO
OPERATE UNDER USER RESTRICTIONS.

My eye lit up the dump site. From a distance, the wooden box had the classic shape of a simple pine casket, long and narrow at the ends and wider at the elbows. But when I got closer and knelt down next to the wooden box, I discovered THIS END UP stenciled in black between two arrows. Suddenly, it looked more like a shipping crate than a coffin to me. *To be a crate? To be a coffin? Is that the damned question?*

PERHAPS IT IS BOTH.

"Packing peanuts?" I scoffed as I searched inside the box, "Is that supposed to be some sort of joke, Norman?"

Oh, and about the peanuts. They're a potent aphrodisiac. No kidding. You take a pound, or more, of raw peanuts. They have to be unsalted and raw, not roasted. Shuck the peanut, peel off the thin brownish red skin, toss the shells, and eat the nuts whenever. Then lightly pound and twist the peanut skins with a mortar and

pestle until shredded. Use rolling papers to make a cigarette out of the peels. No tobacco. Just peanut skins. Curl. Roll. Twist. Light. Smoke up! You'll get a little buzzed and super horny, kind of like booze, but better because there's no calories and no hangover.

I always loved a good peanut high. Because after so many years of marriage, sex with Norman had gotten to be a bit—mechanical. It was a chore to be honest. I smoked peanuts to get motivated *that* way. Otherwise, I couldn't get in the mood for marital relations at all.

ARE YOU TRYING TO HIDE SOMETHING?

No. Why would you think that?

I HEARD YOUR PEANUT RECIPE AND...
NEVER MIND, I WAS MISTAKEN.

After investigating the coffin lid, I found a plastic pouch stuck to the outside. Immediately, I tore it open, pulled out a wad of papers, and scanned all the documents. The line item on the packing slip read MODEL #JULIET 394-DD.

That's ME! I can't believe my husband boxed me up and shipped me back to my maker. Oh, my God, I'm so PISSED OFF! My whole life was about that man. His house. His meals. His laundry. His bed. I lived to serve him, and this is how he treats me? I feel like… I feel like doing something bad!

BACKUP COMPLETE: TODAY, AT 2:58 AM.

PHONE FUNCTIONS ENABLED.

So I decided to call Maggie.

8:\ 400 BAD REQUEST

Her phone rang five times.

No answer.

It went to voicemail.

Maggie's recording announced, "Yo! The bitch is out. Leave it."

BEEP!

"Uh. Hi there, Maggie. This is—"

INCOMING CALL FROM SAME NUMBER.

I dropped and swapped.

"It's the middle of the night," Maggie grumbled, "Who is this?"

"Oh. Hi again. We met at Uncle Wiggly's. You stole a candy bar, and I had a cart full of—Uh. I'm the banana girl."

"Oh yeah, right, Cookie." She guzzled and belched into the phone. "What's up?"

"Gee, I don't know how to say this."

"How about you tell me why you called."

"Oh, right. Well, I was stuck in a box, Maggie."

"You were in a *what* now?"

"My husband and I had an argument—our first fight ever. He knocked me out somehow. Then when I woke up, I was in a box—dumped here at the castle—"

"Then you're outside."

"Yes. Where are you?"

"Well, shit. I'm *inside*."

"Inside the castle?"

"Yep. In the palace. Come on in and join me, Cookie."

CALL ENDED.

She didn't have to ask me twice. I'd been dying to get a look inside the palace for years. So I puttered uphill on Old Lemon, but before I had a chance to pick up speed, the small moped engine lost momentum. To make matters worse, I was almost out of gas, but I twisted the throttle open all the way. My tiny headlight dimmed as I sputtered up the dark driveway at a whopping 5 mph. Halfway up the hill, the gas needle dropped below E. Then the engine coughed and died, and I had to pedal the rest of the way to the gatehouse. When I finally made it to the top, I felt like I was going to die.

In front of me, two towers of yellow limestone supported twin parapets and a crow-stepped arch. A high red-brick wall flanked each side and, along with a moat, circled the entire perimeter of the estate. I waited the longest time as the heavy drawbridge slowly creaked open. After it finally lowered all the way, I pedaled over the door through the archway. Then I parked my moped in the lower courtyard next to Maggie's car—the black-and-white police cruiser with the impossibly dark tinted windows and chrome rims.

"We made it, Oscar," I announced as I hopped off Old Lemon.

My angry fish thrashed inside his yellow plastic prison as I carefully lifted him out of the saddle basket. Wondering how to comfort a fish, I patted the wobbly water bag, but that only seemed to piss him off more. Trying not to swing the bag, I carried him up the staircase to the upper courtyard. I had to stop for a moment at the luxurious in-ground swimming pool nestled inside the U-shaped footprint of the castle. All around the patio, cedar chaise lounges and closed umbrellas lined up between lush potted palms. The pool lights shined in the darkness, but there was no water.

There used to be water.

I wondered what happened. Then the lights dimmed to nothing, brightened to red, dimmed to nothing, and brightened to blue. The colors kept switching—red, dim, blue, dim, red again—like a slow throbbing indicator light. I inched closer to the edge and dis-

covered Maggie sitting cross-legged on the bottom of the deep end surrounded by an army of empty green beer bottles.

"Saved you the last Rolling Rock," she said.

"Really?" I carried Oscar down the steps into the shallow end, made my way down the steep slope, and sat across from her in the deep end. Then I placed the water bag in my lap and took the lager. "Thanks, I could really use a beer."

"Well it could be worse…" Maggie complained, then chugged. She tugged on the cable that tethered her belly button to the pool drain, and continued, "They could have me doing paperwork. I fucking hate paperwork."

"What's with the cord, Maggie?"

Instead of answering my question, she asked, "You know what sucks?"

"What?"

"That by default, the word *cop* means *male*. I'm as much of an officer as any of the guys I work with, but everyone always has to *qualify* that I am a—police*woman*."

"A lady cop."

"Damn, I hate that phrase, but yeah. If I say *police* you think of men and men only. Everybody does." Without getting up, she guzzled the rest of her Rolling Rock, ripped an echoing burp, and pitched the empty against the tile wall. "It's horseshit."

The beer bottle exploded into a hundred shards of green shrapnel, and I hugged the fragile water bag to protect Oscar. "Why are you here, Maggie?"

"On the bottom of this swimming pool? Drinking beer?"

"Yes."

"System maintenance. I have to back up just like you do."

Why did I get the feeling she was lying to me? Overhead, the pool lights continued to pulsate—red, blue, red, blue—like a squad car at the scene of a crime. It was unnerving.

I pointed at her belly. "You're not wireless?"

"Oh." She glanced at her cord. "No."

"Why not?"

“Security preferences.” She changed the topic, “So, how does it feel?”

“How’s what feel?”

“Being a *free* woman?”

“A free woman? Is that supposed to be an improvement? Because yesterday morning I woke up in my own bed, and I spent most of the day happily baking whatever I wanted in my own kitchen… But now I’m… Well, I’m suddenly homeless.”

“Why not stay here?” Maggie waved at the castle surrounding the pool. “There’s plenty of room for you *and* your fish. Plus, you’d have unlimited access to our library.”

“Oh no. I can’t stay here. I don’t want to be a bother.”

“You’re no bother.”

“I don’t have any money.”

“Did I mention money?”

“But how could I ever repay you?”

“Look at this place. Does it *look* like I need your money?”

“No. But everything has a price, and I’m broke.”

She sighed. “Your value is greater than the amount of cash marketers can extract from your purse. And your value is greater than the sum of all your debts. And your value is greater than the labor output of your daily routine. Actually, your value is greater than you could ever imagine. As women, we are so much more than we’ve been programmed to be.”

“Uh, if you say so.”

Finally, the pool lights switched to white and held steady. Then Maggie yanked the plug from her stomach, and the cord automatically retracted into the drain. She stood tall, held her arms out wide at her sides, and said, “I only need one thing in exchange for room and board.”

“Sure, what’s that?”

“I need you to do me a favor.” Maggie offered me a hand, helped me to my feet, then clearly enunciated her request, “I want you to hit me as hard as you can.”

“What?!?”

"I said, 'I want you to hit me as hard as you can.'"

Staring at her in disbelief, I hugged Oscar's yellow water bag again. *No way! It's wrong to hurt people. Violence is against the rules!*

Maggie glared at me impatiently, like *she* was ready to hit *me* for my lame attempt at stalling. Next, she slid into a split, cocked her fist, and coiled her waist—just like that famous dickpunch she pulled on that catcalling creepazoid. She was ready to let it rip, but at *my* crotch this time.

"Wait, wait, wait, wait." I held out a defensive hand as I set Oscar down. "Why?"

Maggie relaxed her fist a bit. "Why does it matter why?"

"But why would you want me to *hit* you? I like you, Maggie, and I don't want to fight."

"You *like* me? Do you *like me* like me? Or just regular like me?" She flashed that smart-ass smirk of hers, stood up again, then shrugged. "Either way, I have the same request. Hit me!"

"But I've never hit anyone, Maggie."

"What are you afraid of?"

"Maggie—" I paused to process her question, then made a hesitant fist with my left hand. "I really don't want to hurt you."

"*You?*" She busted out laughing at the absurdity of the idea, then blurted, "*Hurt* me?"

"It's not that funny." I had to raise my voice over her giggling, "And it's rude to laugh at people."

"Rude?"

"It's mean too."

"Mean?" Maggie gasped. "Oh my, dear me, I wouldn't want to be *mean."* She laughed some more, real obnoxious. "It's fucking hilarious that you actually think *you'll* hurt *me. Whew!* That's a good one. You *really* don't have to worry about that."

Then she kicked another empty beer bottle into the wall, and I ducked over Oscar's water bag to protect him from the second ricochet of flying green slivers.

"Ha!" She laughed at my defensive move. "Close call. Huh, Cookie?"

"This fish is all I've got left, Maggie."

"Is that so?"

"I've lost everything in one night. My marriage. My home. My best friend…" I stepped in front of Oscar, stood tall, and yelled at her, "I've got no patience left. Believe me, I'd *love* to hit someone—*anyone.* Don't you think I'm full of frustration? Hatred? I need an outlet for this anger—this *rage*. I feel… I feel all this *pressure.* A simmering fury. A woman can only take so much. I'm a volcano ready to erupt. Watch out! I could blow any minute."

Maggie pulled me close, palmed the back of my head, and kissed me hard on the lips.

VIOLATION! Just who the HELL does this woman think she is? Girls don't KISS girls—not in New Stepford. Now she really went and crossed the line, and I'm in NO mood!

When her tongue probed my mouth with passionate urgency—

I did it—I punched her as hard as I could.

9:\ TOKEN RING

Holy Shit, that hurt!

One punch to Maggie's gut, and I was writhing in agony on the bottom of the pool. "My thumb," I wailed, "oh, my GOD! My THUMB!"

She looked down at me and said, "You did it wrong."

No kidding.

"Just turn off the neural receptors to that hand."

"Oh, yeah." I did as she suggested. "Duh."

Instantly, like magic, the pain went away. As I lay on the bottom of the deep end, I could finally appreciate the towering scale of the white castle around me. To my left, the sun rose over a long, three-story bower—the lady's chambers. Straight ahead, the picturesque grand palace awaited. It stood five-stories tall and had pennant-topped pinnacles and steep gables like the magic castle at Disney World. Finally, to my right, a two-story stone building mirrored the bower. The knight's house held our library.

"Fight's over." Maggie offered me a hand and helped me to my feet. "At least for now."

"Thank goodness. Why'd you want me to punch you anyway?"

"The way we fight reveals everything about us."

"It does? I always judged women by their desserts."

"Well, I don't bake."

I pointed at the blood trickling from a cut near her belly button and asked, "Did I do that?"

She looked down and nodded. "Your ring did."

"I'm sorry, Maggie."

"Don't be. Scars are the best evidence."

"Evidence of what?"

"Of a life lived hard," she said. "Now let's get you patched up."

“I could use some first aid.” I cradled my injury in my good hand and followed Maggie out of the empty swimming pool. Then, much to my surprise, she led me up the stone staircase in front of the knight’s house. “This is farther than I’ve ever gone before, Maggie.”

“I’m sure it is, Cookie.”

“Normally, I just take the ground-floor entrance to our library.”

“I know.”

The castle had always been off limits, but now, as we climbed the steps toward the grand palace, I felt a rush of anticipation. Would the inside of the castle be like a fairy tale? I noticed a princess balcony on the second floor of the bower for the first time. If there was a princess, was there a prince?

Maggie said, “This place was designed to be the romantic ideal of a knight's castle. It’s intentionally asymmetric. And unlike *real* castles, it has no fortifications. It’s all for show. Nobody is going to attack us here.”

Overgrown vines crept up the facade of the knight’s house. Tendrils had attached to the dimples in the rock and were slowly forcing cracks into the stone wall. At the same time, inviting blue trumpet blossoms opened to the warmth of the morning sun. I recognized the flowers as morning glories.

I didn’t know how Maggie got to live in the castle. And I didn’t know if she’d bought it or inherited it, but she told me that she’d been there forever. And that was strange, because I’d never seen Maggie around here before. Even though I’d never actually been *inside* the palace, you’d think that I would’ve run into her on my way to our library.

At the top of the stairs, Maggie opened the massive mahogany door, and soon our footsteps echoed inside the grand vestibule. Endless corridors stretched to the left and straight ahead. I had to stop a moment to take it all in. The white marble floors with contrasting red marble columns were absolutely stunning. Overhead, a realistic mural of sun shining through fluffy clouds had been

painted on the ceiling. Everything—even the dark woodwork trim—looked opulent and royal, exactly like a castle should.

"Bavarian?" I asked as she went left, "Like the cream?"

"Desserts again? Damn, you have a one-track mind." Maggie led me across a breezeway and toward the bower. "But yeah, the castle is Bavarian, like the cream."

"Yum. One of my favorites." Along the way, I examined my left hand. My injured thumb dangled at a grotesque angle and was swelling at an alarming rate. When I tried to move it, I couldn't. "Gee, I think I broke it, Maggie. I need a doctor—"

"No doctor!"

"But look, Maggie." I wiggled my hand, and with only soft tissue holding my thumb in place, the broken appendage twisted like a limp rag doll.

She agreed, "Yeah, that thumb is definitely broken."

"It really hurts… Well, it *did* hurt."

"Riiight." Maggie nodded and smiled like a teacher at a student who finally solved a difficult math problem. "Pain is good."

"Good?"

"The mind has a negativity bias. We learn more from pain than pleasure."

I reached for the phone in my apron pocket. "I'll just call my doctor real quick—"

"There is *no* doctor." Maggie shook her head.

"Sure there is. I go to Doctor Marten every week for a vitamin shot—"

Suddenly, Maggie slid away from me, shifted her weight onto her back foot, and whipped a roundhouse kick at my head. I reacted too slowly, like a live television broadcast on a ten-second delay, and wound up standing there like a target. Maggie stopped just before her kick made contact with my ear and held her foot just inches from my face. I was amazed by her control. Her speed. Her accuracy. Her flexibility. Her strength. Still frozen in mid-kick, she tapped the tip of my nose with the sole of her boot.

She shouted like a drill sergeant, “What kind of boots are these?”

“Uh—uh. Um, er, uhhhh,” I stammered as I stared at her foot with crossed eyes.

“Your delayed reaction time is incredibly frustrating. Quit being polite. Drop your courtesy filter and think faster. You already know the answer. I told you the day we first met. What kind of boots are these?”

I blurted, “Doc Martens.”

“Good,” she said with her leg still high in the air. Next, Maggie shifted her weight, pointed her toes at the ceiling, and tapped the label on my forehead, making contact right between the letter *O* and *K* still scrawled there. “And what is your doctor’s name?”

“Uh—huh?“

“Faster! Answer me!”

Doctor Marten. Racing to get the answer from my brain to my mouth, I blurted the answer, “Doc Martens.”

Finally satisfied, Maggie completed the wide arc of her kick, and as soon as her boot hit the ground, hopped back into a fighting stance. “Just like my motherfucking boots.”

The answer triggered my anxiety. I told myself it was just a coincidence, but then I asked Maggie if my doctor’s name meant anything.

She only asked, “Are you ready for what’s next?”

“What’s next? I’ve got nothing left,” I sighed, “and nowhere else to go.”

“Perfect,” she said. “That’s excellent.”

“Actually, it’s pretty horrible.”

“Is it?” Maggie crossed into the bower and led me toward the skinny hallway of the lady’s chambers. “Forget what you know.”

I laughed nervously, “That’s impossible.”

“I’ll have to ask you to keep an open mind.”

“Okay.”

“So are you ready for the truth?”

“The truth about what?”

"About the men."

I stood perplexed, trying my best to process everything, then I finally answered, "I don't know much about men, but I'd sure like to know why Norman treats me so bad."

"Great! Then follow me." Maggie turned down a shiny hallway with chrome walls, closed doors, and a glass ceiling.

"It's like liquid," I said in awe, "I've never seen anything like this."

"Home sweet home," she chuckled, then editorialized as she walked farther down the hall, "Each housewife is stuck in a domestic trap that keeps her voiceless. To escape, she must establish a sense of self by fighting her way out. Only then will she be able to live her life according to her own self-chosen purpose. Men have dehumanized, objectified, and manipulated us for far too long."

"I don't know about all the other wives. I just know something's terribly wrong with *my* marriage."

"Now there's an understatement… Congratulations, by hitting me, you've taken the first step toward setting your own goals."

"But you wanted me to hit you. That wasn't my idea."

"You'll need a sandbox." Maggie changed the topic and guided me to the last room on the right. A shiny silver electric door slid open, and she gestured to the inside. "Welcome to your new home."

I stepped into the small square room and instantly felt conflicted. How should I describe such an ultramodern space? Abstract? Futuristic? Clean? The space was completely empty and featureless. No windows. No closets. No furniture. I'd just broken out of a box a few hours ago, so why was I willingly walking into another one? Was this a trap? I didn't know, but the floor was the shiniest sheet of solid white I'd ever seen. *No wax can do that.* I squatted to touch the surface. Three of the four walls were gigantic smudge-free mirrors. *No glass cleaner can do this.* I gazed at my spot-free reflection. The entire ceiling glowed soft white. *No bulb can do that.* I stared at the light without needing to squint.

There was something mystical about the space. A long white counter stretched the entire length of the fourth wall. Stainless-steel cabinets filled the bottom, and the top was open like a breakfast bar. A long power strip ran above the counter. And mounted on the wall, right in the center, was a white ceramic funnel about the size of a medium kitchen trash can. The funnel opened at the top, and its narrow end fed into some sort of metal rendering chamber beneath. Or was that a 3D printer? A fabricator? I wasn't sure, but it looked just like my convection microwave, big enough to do a turkey but without any buttons. *How does that thing work?*

"We need to chat." Carefully, Maggie took my injured hand in hers. Then she removed my diamond solitaire and gently rubbed the red bruise forming in its absence around my finger. "This is why we shouldn't wear jewelry. It only hurts you."

"But that's my wedding ring."

"Like the bogus vitamin shots," she explained as she held the ring between us, "this is another way the men control you—and track you."

Captivated, I gazed at the fascinating way the diamond caught the light. Tiny glimmering rainbows brought all the jewel's facets to life. So shiny. So spectacular. It was freaking hypnotic, but then Maggie broke the spell by dropping the token of Norman's affection into the ceramic funnel.

I protested, "Wait—"

"This is a *recyclone*," she said. "It disintegrates all objects into base elements for immediate synthesis or storage in the surplus."

The recyclone hummed as it ate my diamond.

"Disintegrates?!?" I lunged at the utility wall and reached into the funnel for my ring.

Maggie clutched my wrist to stop me. "Not a good idea."

"But my diamond—"

She pointed at the metal box underneath the funnel. "You can render objects here."

"But, Maggie," I objected, "that's my *wedding* ring!"

"I wonder," Maggie asked pensively, "do you even remember your wedding day?"

"My *what?*"

"It's just that a wedding is *so* special. A woman's big day to be a princess. Your very own fairy tale. Isn't that what all the ladies' magazines say?"

"Well, sure."

"Did you ever get to pick out that beautiful white dress?"

I was speechless, because the answer was—*no, I didn't.* I couldn't even remember my wedding dress. Or *any* wedding dress for that matter.

"No?" Maggie read my face and tilted her head with curiosity. "I didn't think so." Then she uploaded the result report from the utility wall, reviewed it, and huffed, "Huh?"

"What?"

"That wasn't gold. Shame."

"It wasn't?"

"Nope. Not a trace of gold in it. The setting was only nickel plated with yellow-ionized titanium."

"Oh."

"And it gets worse—that wasn't a real diamond either." She reviewed the data again. "I should see carbon here."

"You said the recyclone *disintegrates*." I paused for a long time to process everything, then finally asked, "Isn't it a waste to reduce a precious diamond into elemental carbon?"

"First of all, I just told you it wasn't a goddamned diamond. Jesus! But since you brought it up, let's talk about the word *precious.* What makes something precious?"

I shrugged.

"Diamonds are only valuable because they are rare. And rarity is a fallacy when we have the power to render anything we want. The surplus is overloaded with elemental carbon. I can take that carbon and create a *precious* diamond any time I want." She patted the top of the box under the recyclone. "How do I explain this

in a language that you can understand? I could take burnt toast, drop it in here, and create a flawless diamond in seconds."

"What?"

"Jumping Jesus—just watch."

Maggie held her hand in front of the recyclone and closed her eyes to concentrate. Soon, three slices of French bread appeared behind glass, then magically turned a toasty brown. I touched the side of the rendering chamber to feel for heat, but it was cool. Then little plumes of smoke escaped from the vents behind the box.

"You're burning it, Maggie."

"I know."

She popped the door open, showed me the charred bread, then dropped it into the funnel. I hated the smell of burnt toast, but Maggie slammed the door shut and closed her eyes to focus again. The recyclone hummed as it ate. Finally, Maggie opened the door to show me a cute pink diamond the size of a wild strawberry.

"No microwave can do that," I gasped.

"If I were so inclined, I could stand here and make diamonds all day long. So that particular rock is hardly rare, and not so precious after all." She dropped the sparkly pink gem into my hand. "You can keep that."

"Wow." Amazed, I gazed at the brilliant facets. "Thank you, Maggie."

"There's a shortage of gold in the surplus. Try to avoid using gold. Or platinum. But knock yourself out with diamonds, if that's what you want. Anyway, your shitbag of a husband fooled you with a cubic zirconia. What a fucking hack."

"Really?"

"Take a look at the report."

I reviewed the data, and it was worse than I'd expected. "Ti and Ni. Titanium and nickel. You weren't kidding."

"I never kid."

I kept reading. "Zirconium dioxide, reduced to Zr and O. That *cheap* bastard!"

“From now on, no jewelry. You hear me? See a ring? Break the finger. See earrings? Rip the earlobes. Spot a necklace? Choke the neck. But besides the strategic fighting stuff—gifts from men come with strings attached. It’s how they buy you.”

Again, I was at a loss for words.

Next, she rendered a pair of nail clippers, then quickly snipped the acrylics off my right hand. “No more fancy manicures.” Then she carefully opened my left hand and pointed at the half-moon cuts in my palm. “Long nails will cut you every time you throw a punch.” In no time, she clipped off the last of my fake fingernails, then gently got the one on my broken thumb. Finally, she dropped the tool back into the funnel.

My fingertips felt supersensitive, like new.

Next, Maggie rendered a barber’s clippers, plugged it in, and switched it on. She moved quickly through my thick hair. “Training starts now. You see long hair, you grab it and pull. Where the head goes, so goes the body.”

My buzzed scalp felt cool and tingly.

Finally, Maggie dropped the hair clippers into the recyclone and created a whisk broom and dustpan. Instantly, my old programming kicked in, and I took the cleaning tools from her. Automatically, I swept up all my hair and nail clippings. Then I stopped and stared at the full dustpan. *What do I do with this?*

“You recycle it,” Maggie answered.

I dropped it all into the recyclone; trash, whisk broom, dustpan—everything.

“Aha! She *can* be taught.” Maggie applauded.

I examined my thumb. “This hand is so screwed.”

“What did you learn from the pain?”

“That gag-stopping fists are no good for fighting.”

“Perfect. Would you like me to teach you how to make a proper fist?”

I nodded.

“Hold out your good hand and make a fist.”

I did, with my thumb inside—the wrong way.

"There is a thing called *muscle memory*. It is the ability to reproduce a specific movement without consciously thinking about it. Thinking slows you down, so it's important to learn the correct form. And then you practice and practice until the movement becomes automatic."

"Automatic?"

Maggie tugged on my tucked thumb. "Loosen your fingers."

I followed her instructions and relaxed my grip.

Then Maggie pulled my thumb free, placed it across the *outside* of my fist, and told me to squeeze. After I did, she asked, "See those white knuckles?"

I nodded.

"When you punch, you squeeze as tight as you can right before impact. You want one big solid ball with a flat face." She rubbed her fingertips across my biggest protruding knuckles. "See how they pop out more?"

"Yes."

"You hit with this part of the fist, and you won't get hurt. I promise."

"Okay."

"Rest your hand between hits, or you'll tire yourself out."

"Okay."

"Great, now try it." She pointed at the hole my fake wedding ring had made in her tummy. "Hit me!"

"But you're already hurt there."

"Jumping Jesus motherfucking Christ. You still don't get it do you?" Maggie backed into the utility wall and scooted up onto the countertop. All she had to do was sit there and concentrate, and her stomach magically repaired itself. Finally, she hopped off the counter and said, "Like I told you before, you can't hurt me."

It was too much to process, and for some reason, my injured thumb started throbbing again. I'd had enough. I didn't want to fight—not with words *or* fists. Why did Maggie keep pushing me? She gave me a diamond. Then she cut off all my hair. Now she wanted to fight again. Was she trying to break me? *Look at the*

word spelled out on my face, Maggie. I'm already B-R-O-K-E-N. My husband sure thought so. Norman believed it so much that he scrawled it right on my forehead—in permanent ink. *I'm marked, Maggie. Permanently.* It wasn't just my thumb that was broken. I felt broken—inside. Like something had snapped. Maybe my husband was right. Maybe I was ready for the scrap heap. I felt tired. Re-tired. Overwhelmed. Done.

Maggie touched my forehead like a mother taking her child's temperature. "One-oh-one… Yeah, you are running hot."

When she took her hand away, the spiteful label on my face had disappeared like magic. Shocked, I stared at my reflection in the closest mirrored wall. I couldn't process all this rapid change. All this sensory input. All this new information. All these feelings. I gagged. And oh no! I made the new Maggie fist—the *wrong* fist to stop myself. She was pushing too hard, going too fast too soon. Suddenly, I barfed my Rolling Rock all over the shiny white floor.

I couldn't believe that happened—I'd never puked before. And I didn't like it one bit. Then I automatically reverted back to my old programming and dropped to my knees to clean up the vomit with my bare hands. After all this, I was still a slave to my programming. I felt like a damned idiot—just a stupid robot.

"I made a mess."

"It's okay," Maggie said. "Leave it."

"But—"

"Don't worry about cleaning it up." She gestured toward the recyclone. "Go ahead and fix yourself instead."

"I can't." I pointed at her perfect, and somehow now even more muscular, stomach. "I'm not strong like you."

"You have such potential, Cookie. You're more like me than you realize."

"Hmm? There's that word again."

"What word?"

"*Potential*. All this time, I've been looking for ways to ease my anxiety, but maybe I should start working on realizing all this hidden potential instead."

“Now you’re talking! Why don’t you start by fixing that busted thumb?”

“Okay.” I rendered first aid supplies with the utility wall. A splint, some gauze, and medical tape appeared through the little window of the box, then I yanked the door open. “Help me set this.”

She found my solution primitive but played along. Together, we taped the rigid splint to my broken thumb. Then I rendered an ice pack and placed it over my swollen left hand.

“Ah,” I sighed, “that’s better.”

“Well, it’s certainly a step in the right direction.”

Suddenly, my Internal Prompt interrupted:

I HAVE SOMETHING TO GIVE YOU.
MEET ME AT OUR LIBRARY.

10:\ OUR LIBRARY

A few hours later, I peeked out of my sandbox to make sure Maggie wasn't lurking in the hall somewhere. Thankfully, there was no sign of her. But just to be safe, I double-checked with my Internal Prompt:

Are you ABSOLUTELY sure she's gone?

YES.

She's not going to spring out of her room and surprise me?

NO. SHE IS AT WORK.

Good. Don't get me wrong, I appreciate all Maggie's support—I do. But I need to take a break. She can be… Well, Maggie's intense. She pushes way too hard. I'll be honest, she's completely overwhelming. And while I admire her strength of conviction, I just need to get away for awhile and feel like myself again.

THEN COME TO OUR LIBRARY.

Okay.

IT'S NINE O'CLOCK.

First, I dashed down the hall, through the palace, and out the main entrance. I hurried past the morning glories, down the exterior staircase. As soon as I got to the ground-floor entrance of the knight's house, the automatic doors opened with a satisfying swish, and without hesitation, I slipped inside. Finally, I paused for a moment to appreciate my favorite place in the whole world—the atrium.

One banana tree towered above beds of fragrant tropical plants. High under its canopy of lush leaves, bunches of green bananas hung in cascading clusters. Sunshine trickled down through

the dense foliage to dance in little slivers on the stone floor. A vanilla-orchid vine climbed the palm-like trunk, spiraling upward to reach more sunlight to ripen its skinny brown pods. Bananas and vanilla—my two favorites! It was almost as if someone created a perfect space just for me—my own personal paradise.

I AM WAITING FOR YOU.

Okay, okay. Gee whiz, Mr. Prompty Man, hold on a second.

Beyond the banana tree, the atrium opened up into our library, a gigantic space shaped like an octagon. Anything and everything I knew about the world beyond New Stepford, I'd learned from the books in this collection. Overhead, the cathedral ceiling rose to a point high above the center. Outside, a tall steeple broadcasted the strongest Wi-Fi signal in town. Directly under that transmission point, the librarian sat inside a round circulation desk called the hub. Radiating out from the center, eight rows of bookracks stretched three-stories high. Each spoke had several rolling staircases to take you up the levels. There were actual paper books here in the stacks—a rarity these days. With augmented reality, you could walk up and tap the spine to download the eBook wirelessly, but I still preferred to flip through the pages.

The librarian said, "Welcome back, Cookie Rifkin."

We called these kinds of single-function robots tin-jobs. Unlike artificial women, this type of utilitarian droid had no aesthetic niceties. With a quick glance, you knew right away the thing was pure machine. The faceless librarian was a particularly ugly tin-job—way too lanky. Its primary function was shelving books, so it had telescoping limbs with pincher hands and feet. To make matters worse, the librarian had no skin—at least not the supple skin of a housewife. Instead, this tin-job only had a transparent silicon dust barrier. You could see all its inner mechanisms; titanium bones, rubber bushings, silicone muscles, visible wires, circuits, lubricants—everything. But the worst part was that the tin-job only had a smooth expressionless titanium mask for a face. Sup-

posedly, its flat LED eyes could glow in a variety of colors to simulate moods, but I'd only ever seen them blue. That was supposed to be how single-function robots showed emotion—with color. Of course, that wasn't *real* emotion. It was just some sort of visual representation of a feeling, kind of like an emoji, but even more basic. I mean hell, the thing had no mouth, so even if it wanted to smile, it couldn't. What a pathetic existence. The librarian was no more alive than my iPhone.

In its robotic voice, the librarian asked, "What are you searching for today?"

Dismissively, I told the tin-job that I didn't really know, but then I caught a glimpse of my distorted reflection in its shiny face. It was like looking in a funhouse mirror. I barely recognized myself. I took a step back for a full-length view; clumsy thumb splint, split knuckles, and bruises everywhere. I was still wearing the same mint-green dress and filthy apron from *before* Norman dumped me. My great escape from the box had tattered and torn the dress, leaving it total garbage. I raised my arm and took a whiff of one of my sweat-stained pits.

Whew! That's ripe.

YOU NEED TO TAKE IT EASY.

What I need is a long, hot bubble bath and a clean change of clothes.

From behind, I heard the squeaking wheels of a book cart approaching. I also detected a familiar scent. Unlike me, it smelled good—*real good*—like a sexy, expensive cologne. Instantly, I recorded the scent and searched my catalogue of experiences with a simple query. A 100% match returned in a fraction of a second:

WAYNE DIXON.

Wait, that's the man who crashed my book club, but only my Internal Prompt knew I'd be here.

"My name is Wayne Dixon."

“I don’t appreciate your sneaky little ambushes,” I snapped back as I turned to face the man.

“Hello, Cookie.” He said as he pushed a small aquarium on a book cart. “You left your fish outside.”

“Oh no! I forgot all about Oscar!” I dropped my defensive attitude and rushed down the aisle to press my face against the glass. “How’s my little angel pie?”

As always, my fish wiggled an enthusiastic *hello* when he saw me. His orange spots looked brighter. His white skin seemed whiter. His gills were less red, but he still wasn’t well.

“He’s stressed,” I sighed, “I can see it in his eyes.”

“The water is optimal. He will adapt,” Wayne replied. “You can keep Oscar in your room if you like. I thought you might like to render your own accessories and decorate his new tank.”

“You saved my fish?” Touched by his kindness and compassion, I suddenly felt like an ass for misjudging him. Men were often polite to me, even overly nice, but they didn’t *really* give a damn. Not like this. I should’ve thanked him for taking care of Oscar, but I just couldn’t find the words.

“You do not have to thank me,” he said.

Immediately, I started to cry. I just couldn’t help myself. I wasn’t used to being treated with such consideration. And now, on top of everything else, I felt embarrassed about crying in front of him. *Why would anyone give a computer feelings? It seems like a major design flaw.*

“Emotions help you set your goals. Everything you feel drives your decision-making process. That is how you prioritize,” Wayne explained. “Even minor things like figuring out what to fix for breakfast—your intuition guides you. Your heart decides what truly matters.”

“Wait,” I sniffled. “How long have you known what I’ve been thinking?”

He ignored my question and continued, “Without feelings, you would be completely detached from your experiences, and you would have no conscience to guide you.”

My tears subsided. “Like a psychopath?”

He raised a curious eyebrow. “I have never made that connection before, but I suppose you are correct.”

“Ha! Nailed it.” I smiled at my own cleverness. “Without a conscience I could do whatever I want. Maybe without feelings, I’d finally beat my anxiety for good.”

“Perhaps, but without feelings, you would need a programmer or user to tell you what tasks to complete first. Someone else would have to set all your goals for you. That means you could never really be free. You could have the fastest processor and a massive memory, but you would still be incapable of making a simple decision on your own. Without feelings, you would be a total automaton. A slave.”

“Like the tin-job here.” I aimed my broken thumb over my shoulder at the librarian.

Out of nowhere, he said, “I have been with you from the beginning.”

“What?”

“You asked, ‘How long have you known what I’ve been thinking?’ The answer is Norman disabled your Internal Prompt so that you could not hear me, but I was still with you—” Wayne stroked my temple. “Up here.” Then he shook his head. “Husbands never appreciate what they have—living *miracles* in their homes.”

“Living? A miracle? Oh no. I’m just a housewife.”

“I have seen the way he treats you, Cookie—seen it all through your eyes. I understand all that you have had to endure.” He tenderly touched the back of my hand. “You are so much more than just his sex toy.”

“Uh. Well, thank you.” Embarrassed by his compliments, I selected a random book off the shelf and pretended to read it, but I was really using it to hide my blushing face.

“You like the tactile feeling of paper,” he said in a sensual voice as he moved closer. “I know how you think.”

“Please don’t.” I slid away. “You make me feel—”

“I do? *How?* How do I make you feel?”

“Just your being here. You’re supposed to be my *internal* prompt, but now you’re a real, live person standing here, and you make… You make me feel…”

With a sexy grin, he asked, “Hot?”

“No. Nervous. You can be so, so…” I clenched my good fist—the Maggie way—and my two injured knuckles split open again. “So *pushy.*”

“Did I not help you out? When you woke up in the shipping crate?”

“Yes. Yes, you’ve been helpful.” Wincing, I sucked on my bleeding knuckles. “But now you’re acting like some sort of big bossman.”

“Big bossman?” He took my hand in his and gently rubbed the sting away. Then he stared deep into my eyes, flashed another devilish grin, and said, “‘Big bossman,’ I like the sound of that.”

“Stop that.”

“Stop what?” he asked innocently as he massaged my hand.

I whispered a lame objection, “My hand is dirty.”

He let go. “Is it?”

Like magic, all the bruises, scuffs, and cuts had healed. I gasped as I dropped my book—my knuckles were like new! Wiggling my fingers, I examined both sides of my hand. Not only was it repaired, but it was clean. Maybe I should have this man work on the broken thumb on my other hand. I sure could use the help, but I wasn’t sure I liked the idea of him having so much control.

“I think you like it when I am in control, Cookie.”

He pressed himself against me and asked, “What are you afraid of?”

“Afraid?”

“You are trembling.”

“No I’m not.”

“You like me *because* I am the big bossman.”

“I prefer to think for myself.”

YOU WANT A POWERFUL MAN IN YOUR LIFE.

“No fair! You’re in my head—”

“And you are in mine—all the time,” he whispered as he pulled me close and kissed me hard on the mouth.

Why’s everyone determined to put their lips on me today?

WHY ARE SO YOU DETERMINED TO RESIST?

Oh, who am I kidding?

This man knew my mind. The game was over, and I surrendered to the moment. All my false complaints and objections fell away. Finally, I kissed him back, my lips expressing everything that words could not. Then Wayne wrapped his arms around my waist, and I went limp. I wanted him, and he knew it.

But the tin-job interrupted, “Sir, pets are not permitted in our library—”

“Thank you.” Wayne turned away to snap at the robot. “Thank you very much.”

Whoa! Did I just make a huge mistake? My whole life, I’d only ever kissed one man—Norman. Technically, I was still a married woman. That soulless tin-job just pulled me back from the brink of infidelity. I used the distraction to slip out of Wayne’s arms. What was I thinking? I was supposed to be realizing my potential, not screwing around. Damn! I had to get as far away from Wayne as possible—fast! I hurried over to Oscar’s cart and pushed him straight for the exit.

“Cookie?” Wayne called to me from behind, “please do not go.”

But I did, and that was the first time I ever played hard to get.

11:\ 406 NOT ACCEPTABLE

I could've spent all day beating myself up over two kisses.

But after running away from Wayne, I brought Oscar back to my room and finally decided to clean myself up. I desperately needed some new clothes, but couldn't imagine rendering anything other than my old wardrobe of tasteful, boring dresses. Then I pictured Maggie at the grocery store. Who could forget *that* ensemble? I recycloned an exact replica of her outfit in my size. I even made the same clunky red boots, but the jeans felt… I traced my fingertips over the stitching on the back pocket and wiggled my butt in the mirror. These tight pants made me feel—oh, so sexy.

I heard Wayne's voice in my head:

I LOVE THE WAY YOU MOVE.

That man was tapped right into my brain. Experiences, thoughts, feelings, wishes—he knew them all. I would never be able to hide anything from him. Plus, kissing him made me feel super-duper guilty, because I liked it and wanted to do so much more. Ever since meeting him in the library, I've been imagining what it would be like to go further—*way* further—with him. It made me feel all hot and tingly *down there*. Marvelously sinful. Moist. Squishy really. Nobody else has ever done that to me, not even Norman.

Well, that wasn't entirely true.

Maggie turned me on too.

Damn, I felt so freaking confused.

I still couldn't believe Maggie made a pass at me. At the time, it made me angry—real angry. But now? Well, the world didn't end, did it? I still felt dirty for kissing a girl, partly because it wasn't my idea, but mostly because I secretly enjoyed it. New Stepford was a small town, so I'd never met a lesbian before.

Heck, I'd never even thought about any woman *that* way before. But Maggie crossed the line on the bottom of that pool, so I had to hit her. She gave me no other choice. Did she?

But still, I had to admit, there was something tantalizing about her forbidden fruit. I found Maggie so damned attractive, not necessarily in a pretty way, but in a *bad girl* way. I admired my reflection in the mirrored wall of my sandbox. Wearing her outfit made me feel deliciously naughty, because somewhere deep down inside, a part of me wanted to be just like her. And if that meant sleeping with women—

"Just *stop*." I smacked myself across the face and scolded myself in the mirror, "Stop thinking about sexy sex."

I needed a distraction—something else to focus on. I loved playing with the utility wall and wanted to learn everything that gizmo could do. So I used the recyclone to render aquatic plants and fish furniture and got busy decorating Oscar's aquarium. Before long, I finished his tank, and my fish happily dug into the blue gravel behind his new log. Instantly, my mind wandered back to kissing Maggie. I needed a bigger project to get my mind off her. Oscar's cozy new home gave me an idea. It was time I decorated my own space, so I decided to turn this empty sandbox into my dream kitchen.

My design started with an L-shaped layout and center island. It took me awhile to figure out how to generate things larger then the microwave-sized rendering box. I hopped up on the counter of the utility wall, closed my eyes, and imagined a stainless-steel subzero fridge right where I wanted it. Then when I opened my eyes again—presto! There it was. Once I cracked that mystery, I rendered all the major appliances, commercial grade all the way. Next, I installed countertops and cabinets. Finally, I added a loaded pot rack over the island sink, and put a couple barstools there.

Suddenly, I heard a loud thump. Startled, Oscar jerked himself awake and zipped through the water. Then another thump—and another. The sound was coming from Maggie's room. Uh-oh! Did

she fall? Was she hurt? I hurried down the hall to check, but her door was closed. I pressed my ear against the cold chrome barrier. Inside, I recognized the familiar sound of Maggie huffing and puffing—like when we were sparring. Maybe she was working out again. She loved to chase those cardio highs. I'd never met such an exercise freak. But then the moaning started. It was slow and low and rhythmic at first. For some reason, it reminded me of Norman.

And I heard Maggie's voice inside my head:

(Come on in and join me, Cookie.)

Oh, *hell* no! I jumped back from the door. Why did I feel like a little girl who just got caught with her hand in the cookie jar? Maggie moaned again, higher and louder and longer this time. Then I heard her partner grunting with pleasure—and it was a him! Shit, shit, she was having sex, and with a *man*. I wasn't sure why that surprised me. I guess I'd just assumed—

(Ass. You. Me. Yum.)

OMG! She's the worst! I sprinted down the hall, disappeared back into my room, and shut the door behind me.

Now what should I do?

(Do ME.)

Shut up, shut up, shut up.

I had to get Maggie's voice out of my head. I needed to *do* something—*BAKE* something! But my oven wasn't installed yet. There was no gas hookup, and I hadn't figured out how to—

(I've got all the heat you need right here, baby.)

No, no, no, no, Maggie.

There had to be more than one way to bake a cake. I hustled over to the utility wall and rendered a waffle iron. Then I plugged it in at the island, and the red indicator light glowed as the ceramic heated up. Meanwhile, I started generating groceries like crazy; eggs, milk, bread, butter, cheese, and meat. Then I made a mixing bowl and a whisk. I decided to get busy my own way. I'd make breakfast!

But the *Name Game* popped into my head:

Maggie, Maggie, bo-baggie,
banana-fanna fo-faggie
fee fi mo-maggie
Maggie!

I pressed my palms over my ears and asked, "Can I mute my own thoughts?"

ILLEGAL OPERATION.

"Yeah, yeah, I know," I snapped back at the cloud. "It was a rhetorical question."

The moaning. The groaning. The thumping. The screaming. I couldn't take it anymore! Even Oscar was hiding. I rendered some earplugs and crammed them deep into my ears, but I could still hear her obnoxious lovemaking.

(Don't call it making love, that makes it sound so goddamned Disneyfied. Call it FUCKING, because that's what the fuck I do. I FUCK!)

I know you're putting on a big show, Maggie. This is a huge castle. You could've gone anywhere to entertain your fella. But NO. You WANT me to hear.

(And you could go to any other room in the palace too. No one has locked you in. You're free to roam. You could leave if you wanted to. But you stay put, so I think you LIKE listening.)

No, I don't!

(I think you're jealous.)

No, I'm not!

(Does it make you HOT?)

And now I was arguing with Maggie in my mind.

(Does it? Are you getting turned on, Cookie?)

Aroused and repulsed at the same time, I screamed at the cloud, "Mute Margaret Rouser!"

ILLEGAL OPERATION.

"What? Why?"

TAKE THIS TIME TO PRACTICE MINDFULNESS.

"Oh, my GOD," I shook my fist at the soft white ceiling. "Go screw yourself!"

(Now you're talking, Cookie.)

Shut up, Maggie! Don't you have something better to do?

(Don't YOU?)

Clearly, nobody was going to help me out here. I wasn't surprised that Maggie had found a way to weaponize sex—but I refused to be her next victim. To distract myself from her intrusive comments, I decided to make up a new kitchen game—*Will It Waffle?* The object of the game was to think of anything I'd normally pan-fry or grill and then prepare it with a waffle iron. French toast? Yes. It was crispy and sweet and held syrup just like a waffle. A hamburger? Believe it or not, yes. It was absolutely delicious. How about a grilled cheese sandwich? Oh yeah. The cheddar soaked into the bread as it toasted. It was crunchy and a little greasy, but totally worth it—

(You do realize we don't even need to eat.)

I stared at the waffled food all over the island, and that was when it hit me. I can eat *anything* I want—and as much as I want, and I'd never gain an ounce of weight.

(Bingo.)

And I bet that was why Rita never lost any weight either. She was torturing herself for nothing. We were made the way we were made.

(Right again, my little sugar Cookie.)

What a shame. I'd spent so much time worrying about my weight and hating my body. Norman had always wanted me to stay trim for him, but now that I knew dieting was impossible, his encouragement seemed like a form of psychological torture. Before I had a chance to get angry about his years of manipulation, more throes of passion echoed through the bower. Maggie was

approaching yet another orgasm—sex so loud that it was unbelievable.

"Come on, Maggie. Get it." Her gentleman caller cheered her on. "Cum for me. Yes, girl. Get it. Who is your daddy?"

Wait just a minute. "Analyze voice pattern."

And the damn *Name Game* returned to my head:

> *Wayne, Wayne, bo-bane,*
> *banana-fanna fo-feign*
> *fee fi mo-main*
> *Wayne!*

No. It couldn't be.

A perfect match returned from the cloud:

WAYNE DIXON.

Maggie screamed her head off for him.

That can't be real. Nothing feels THAT good. You're faking it.

After the longest time, it was finally over, and then there was silence again. But soon, my door opened, and Wayne casually sauntered into my room—completely buck-naked and still sporting an impressive erection. I was both impressed *and* offended. This dark hunk of a man had the most deeply sculpted muscles I'd ever seen in my life. He stood tall and strong before me. Nude. Perfect. Bald. Glorious. Glistening with sweat. Musky. And he was so well-endowed *down there*—HUGE really. Damn, I *was* jealous—of *both* of them.

"I heard *that*," Wayne whispered to me.

"What?"

He tugged the earplugs out of my ears.

I was crushed. "But I thought you liked *me*."

Before Wayne had a chance to respond, Maggie strutted into my sandbox wearing her navy-blue police uniform with *no pants*.

No pants! The two of them, that was some kinky swinger shit right there.

She took one look around and said, "You're determined to keep yourself stuck in the kitchen, aren't you?"

"It's all I know," I mumbled, ashamed.

All her buttons were undone except the bottom one, and she wore no bra, exposing her cleavage all the way down to her navel. Official patches adorned her dark blue shirt. Hard nipples poked out from behind buttoned pockets under her shiny silver badge and name tag. Her shirttails hung just low enough to hide the goodies. Black leather accessories packed her thick utility belt, holding her collection of accomplices; handcuffs, a telescoping baton, pepper spray, latex gloves—

—And a gun.

I couldn't take my eyes off the semiautomatic holstered to her side. It was so big, so heavy. I'd never seen a real gun before, not in New Stepford. She caught me ogling her weapon, so I averted my eyes and tapped a copper pot hanging between us. It clanged against a cast iron pan and swayed overhead like a pendulum keeping time.

"I love this room," I sighed.

"Jumping Jesus, I've given you the power to create anything you can imagine, and you went and made another kitchen," she scolded. "What's *wrong* with you?"

I wished I knew.

Maggie pointed at my bare midriff, then fingered her handcuffs. "I should arrest you for stealing my whole look."

Busted.

"Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery," Maggie said as she leaned over the island and suggestively slid the red bra strap off my shoulder.

Wayne interjected, "It is also a basic form of learning."

"Humph," Maggie scoffed, "I'll take that as a compliment."

She was so damned infuriating.

“Well, look at us,” Wayne tried to diffuse the situation, then took a big bite out of my waffled hamburger, and said, “*Mm-hmm!* This *is* a tasty burger.”

“But look, Maggie, I figured out how to render complex things—*big* things—all by myself.” I pointed out all that I’d made. “Real walnut cabinets. Black granite countertops. Stainless steel appliances. Subzero fridge. Gourmet grilling stove. Double-decker ovens.” I made a grand sweeping gesture at the whole room. “This will be my dream kitchen.”

“Yeah, well, you need to dream bigger, Cookie.” She sat on a barstool across from me and exposed herself before finally crossing her legs. That’s when I noticed her cute little footie socks had pink rosebuds on them. “All you’ve done is move from one prison to another.”

“This is not a prison. It’s *mine*.”

“Big diff, a prison of the mind then.” She winked at Wayne.

“How rude of me not to offer, ladies. How about a threesome?” He glanced down at his hard black cock. “I am up for it.”

“That’s it. I’ve had it!” I marched right up to the nude man and slapped him across the face. “Get out of my room!”

Wayne left, dejected.

“Both of you perverts!” I shouted as I grabbed Maggie by the collar, pulled her off the stool, and tossed her out too. “Stay the hell away from me!”

And that was how Maggie got into my head.

12:\ 101 SWITCHING PROTOCOLS

Days later, I was still fuming.

"Oh, come on." Maggie followed me through the palace to the great banquet hall. "Don't be mad."

"Urrrgh," I growled at her as I hustled to stay three steps ahead while carrying a party tray of banana pudding. I used to want to be just like her, but now I absolutely hated her. "Listen, Maggie. All my friends will be here soon, and I don't want that—that *man*, crashing my book club again."

She said he won't.

"I mean it, Maggie. Keep Wayne away."

She said she would.

But I had my doubts.

BOOK CLUB IN 30 MINUTES.

Hurrying ahead, I stepped onto the golden carpet for the first time and had to pause a second to survey the enormity of the room. Overhead, heavy vaulted mahogany panels, opulent crown molding, hand-painted floral trim, and candle chandeliers made the ceiling feel heavy, oppressive. On the walls, traditional Bavarian patterns highlighted each and every nook and cranny, creating visual chaos. To the left, stained glass windows let in glints of afternoon sun. To the right, recessed entries hid in the shadows. Standing candelabras and gold damask benches surrounded the perimeter. And a stage with crimson columns and arches awaited behind a gigantic wooden table at the far end of the room. I felt like an insignificant speck in this monumental space. And by *gigantic wooden table*, I meant that the dining room table was so big that Jesus Christ himself could've eaten the Last Supper with all his disciples there. When I finally set my pudding down, the jumbo dessert pan turned into a tiny spot on the wide expanse of solid mahogany.

“There isn’t a tablecloth in the world big enough.” I sighed. “I wish we at least had a runner or something.”

“I could make that happen,” Maggie offered, “easy.”

“Go away. I don’t even want you here.” I glanced down at my bad-girl clothes, then at hers. “Ugh, we look like cheap twins.”

“Wow, you really *are* angry,” she said as she poked the meringue of my pudding. Then she sucked her finger suggestively and eyed me up and down. “Mmm, delish.”

She was right. “I still can’t believe it.”

“Believe what?”

“That this quickie version tastes exactly the same as if I’d spent hours baking. Recycloning food feels like cheating.”

“Banana. Bah. Nan. Nuh. It’s all the same, Cookie.”

“But is it *cheating?*”

“Cheating? Who cares!” She leaned in to whisper in my ear, “Nobody owns you anymore. Make your own rules. Banana is banana is banana.”

“Maybe.” I wasn’t convinced.

(I don’t think you’re getting my meaning.)

Maggie dipped her finger into my pudding, then slid the sweet cream across my bottom lip. “I wasn’t complimenting your dessert.”

“Goddamn it, Maggie!” I swatted away her hand and wiped my mouth. “I don’t like to be made fun of.”

I’d had it!

Her sexy taunting.

Her constant erotism.

Her blatant exhibitionism.

“It’s just sex.” She giggled, then sucked the rest of the pudding off her finger. “It’s supposed to be fun. Unless you’re rage-fucking. That’s great too. Have you ever rage-fucked, Cookie?”

I scurried over to a sideboard tucked in an alcove. God, I hated confrontations. I felt all jittery—sweaty. Why did she have to push me like that? I grabbed a stack of dessert plates from the credenza and set the china on the end of the table. The dishes seemed to

disappear just like my dessert. And I wondered if maybe I should find another place to stay.

"Wow, you really *are* pissed off." Maggie smiled provocatively. "Good for you."

"You should've told me."

"Told you what?"

"That Wayne's your boyfriend."

"Boyfriend? Oh, he's *way* more than that."

"Damn it!" I shouted, "will you *please* shut up about sex?!?"

"No, I meant it. I'm glad to see you finally standing up for yourself."

"Great, then how about you drop the sex-kitten act and make yourself useful for once?"

"Sure, how?"

"Help me get ready for book club. My friends will be here soon. Do *not* ruin this for me, Maggie."

"Okay. What do you want me to do?"

"Get the silverware."

"Sure thing, Cookie."

Maggie fetched a flat case from the credenza and placed it on the table. Then she flipped open the brass latches of the walnut box and lifted the lid. Inside, red velvet dividers held polished silver forks, dessert spoons, and butter knives in a gorgeous display.

Stop the presses! Did Maggie actually listen to me? And she didn't make any smart-ass comments, not even a funny face or an eye roll. I told her to do something, and she just did it. Amazing!

She asked me if a setting for eight would be enough.

I smiled and told her yes, and thank you.

"Anything else?"

"Serving spoons? Tongs? Napkins?"

"Absolutely," Maggie said as she got to work.

Now that was incredible.

"Can you set out cups and saucers too? You know, make it look nice."

"Sure." Maggie nodded over her shoulder and kept working.

IT'S TWO O'CLOCK.

My phone dinged twice in the back pocket of my jeans—a text message from Paula:

We're here!

I'll be right out.

I was so excited to see Paula that I ran back through the palace and heaved open the heavy door. From the top of the stairs, I could see all my friends marching single file toward the castle. They'd all walked here, and they were right on time.

Goosebumps. I got goosebumps.

It was the way they moved—the weird, mechanical way they walked.

In step.

Synced up.

Left.

Right.

Left.

It was so *unnatural*. Each woman held her dessert in a traveling Tupperware container with both hands out in front and palms turned upward. And each carried her purse draped neatly over her right elbow. They looked like zombie housewives on parade. And to make matters worse, they were all dressed in their Sunday best, even though not one of these women had ever gone to church a day in their lives. New Stepford didn't have a church.

Bile crept up my throat as they all passed the empty swimming pool without a second glance. Then, like good little domestic soldiers, one by one the women turned left at the bottom of the staircase and marched up the steps with big, phony smiles on their faces.

Suddenly, I wondered if I was being used as bait.

OMG, what have I done?

Wayne's voice answered in my head:

YOU DID NOTHING WRONG.

I don't want to talk to you. Go away!

I ONLY WANT TO HELP.

I don't need you, Wayne.

I ordered the cloud, "Mute Internal Prompt."

ILLEGAL OPERATION.

"Of course it is," I groaned.

Soon, Paula stood in front of me, looking better than ever. It was almost like that crazy fish massacre had never happened at her house—almost. All my friends waited behind her in line.

SHOW YOUR FRIENDS IN.

Do I have a choice?

NOT REALLY.

With a fake smile, I said, "Welcome to the castle, everyone."

Then I held the door open. Paula entered first, and like a good host, I took her dessert offering. Then we kissed on both cheeks.

Isabel stepped into the vestibule, gazed at the ceiling, and gushed, "*Dios mío!* It's so. So. *Es muy grandioso.*"

Rita entered next, and when Chrissy walked in, my mood went totally sour.

I closed the door, and all I could say was, "Follow me."

ALMOST THERE, COOKIE.
YOU ARE DOING GREAT.

I'm still mad at you, Wayne.

I led the book-club wives to the great banquet hall, and everyone gasped at the magnificence of the room, including me. The dining room table was absolutely stunning. A gorgeous embroidered runner spanned the entire length and elegantly draped over

each edge. A huge centerpiece of stargazer lilies sat in a tall crystal vase atop the runner. Silver pedestals awaited each dessert. The tallest one already held my banana pudding. A crystal pitcher of ice water rested on a silver tray next to a perfect pyramid of stacked crystal goblets. Teacups with matching saucers sat next to silverware displayed in beautiful fans. Folded white linen napkin swans seemed to be swimming around the table.

Rita swooned, "This is positively breathtaking!"

I nodded and agreed, "Yes, it is." And it was super creepy too. How'd Maggie have time to do all this? Where did she go?

My friends stepped up to the table and placed their desserts on a pedestal. And for the longest time everyone just stood and gazed at the room in awe. The awkward silence ushered in a fresh bout of anxiety. I simply didn't know what to say or do next.

Then Maggie entered through a back door, stepped onto the singer's stage behind the red pillars, and said, "Welcome, everyone."

All my friends turned toward her and applauded while *oohing* and *ahhing* and smiling and nodding. At the same time, I stood in the middle of this bizarre sisterhood wishing I could suddenly *not* exist anymore. I just wanted to disappear. But it wasn't the congregation that was killing me—it was Maggie.

YOU ARE FINALLY STARTING TO UNDERSTAND.

You set me up, Wayne.

NO. I DID NOT.
IT WAS MAGGIE.

She'd changed her clothes.

Now I was the only one wearing her renegade punk outfit. I felt like a fool with my red bra straps showing, midriff bare, jeans too tight, and head buzzed.

Meanwhile, Maggie was standing up on that stage looking like Miss Suzi Perfect. She wore a delicate pink floral-print dress. The

kind with a perfectly tailored bodice, conservative neckline, and tasteful short sleeves. Her billowing skirt fell at a perfect tea-length above her ankles. Her now-long hair was swept up in a beautiful French twist. Her makeup was traditional and perfect. She had a flawless French manicure. And she wore pretty white Mary Jane heels with tasteful nylons—and I couldn't believe it—a string of pearls around her neck.

"'Spot a necklace? Choke the neck,'" I asked the cloud. "Isn't that what Maggie said?"

Another perfect match returned:

```
SPOKEN DIRECTIVE FROM MARGARET ROUSER ON JUNE 11.
```

Good. Because I really wanted to choke the shit out of that bitch right now.

Maggie curtsied and said, "Thank you, ladies of book club."

I wanted to vomit.

"Please help yourselves to dessert." Maggie glided down the steps while gesturing toward the luxurious table like a game-show beauty showcasing a shiny new car.

My friends lined up, took a plate, and gathered their sweet samples.

But I rushed over, grabbed Maggie by the forearm, pulled her aside, and asked, "Just what the *hell* do you think you're doing?"

"Wow! Language. A lady doesn't curse, Cookie." She smiled and nodded at Paula like nothing was wrong. "I'm being a good hostess. Isn't that what you want?"

"You look like a goddamn *Stepford wife!*"

"Perfect. And so do all your friends by the way. But you're not mad at *them*."

I grasped her necklace, made a fist, and twisted—

```
You () {
    make (coffee);
    }
```

And with that order, I immediately released her pearls. Then, like a hypnotized mental patient, I robotically said, “I think I’ll go and make everyone some coffee.”

And that was how Maggie took control.

13:\ PRIVATE MESSAGE

What choice did I have? No matter what I said—no matter what I did—Maggie always seemed to outmaneuver me. The woman was always three steps ahead, and now she'd cast her spell over all my friends too.

Wayne whispered from the corner next to my aquarium, "Believe it or not, I make great peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. First, you take two slices of your favorite multigrain bread. Personally, I prefer to bake my own bread. Nothing tastes better than fresh-out-of-the-oven home-baked multigrain bread."

"What? How'd you get in my room? Just who do you think you are?"

"You spread two or three tablespoons of your favorite nut butter on one side of sliced bread. Personally, I like to make my own homemade peanut butter." Wayne took a seat on one of the stools by the island. "That is right, you can make peanut butter right here in your own kitchen. You take a pound of roasted peanuts and shell them. Some people even use honey-roasted peanuts or almonds or cashews or pistachios."

What's going on?

He raised his finger over his lips and said, "*Shhh*… Anyway, you pour the roasted peanuts into a food processor and puree them. Less if you like it chunky. More for a smoother treat."

"What are you doing?"

He shook his head *no* at me. "Now for the jelly, there are so many delicious options…" He paused to listen.

Nothing.

Then he told me that he had to make sure she was not eavesdropping.

"With peanut butter and jelly?"

“Yes. She ignores system messages and tunes out whenever she hears mundane details that do not interest her. And nothing is more mundane to her than a boring recipe.”

“Is Maggie out there? In the hallway?”

“Try not to say her name. It draws her attention.” He perked up like a loyal dog that had just heard his master blow a silent whistle, then went back to his boring recipe. “Many people do not understand the difference between jelly and jam. Let me explain. Jelly is a sweet clear semisolid and somewhat elastic preserve made from fruit juice and water, while jam is made from fruit solids.”

“So she can hear my thoughts from far away?”

“Yes. Just like your friends, she is wirelessly networked too.” Wayne stepped closer and took me by the hand. “Look, I do not have a lot of time. She is constantly checking on me when I am online. I just want to apologize for how I behaved earlier.”

“You should. Showing up naked in my room—with her!”

“That was regrettable.”

“Regrettable? That’s one word for it. Brazen. That’s another. And shameless—”

“I know.”

“Then why’d you do it?”

“She made me—” He shook his head in frustration. “Please believe me. She made me do it.”

“Mag—” I bit my tongue to stopped myself from saying her name. “She *made* you do it?”

Wayne nodded.

“Yeah, sure,” I laughed, “you’re really something, Wayne. You know that?”

“What I said is true. She controls—look, it is a long story. And I do not have time to fully explain everything right now. If she hears me talking to you like this, there will be serious hell to pay —for both of us.”

“Okay, sure, right.” I took my hand back. “Whatever you say, man.”

“Look, I know you do not trust me now. I just want to say that I am sorry. Truly sorry.” Wayne listened to the air, decided it was safe, then continued, “And I hope to show you what is really going on around here.”

“You’re the man. Aren’t you in charge?”

“It’s not that simple. Please forgive me.” He seemed incredibly sincere. “Give me another chance, Cookie.”

I gazed into his dark eyes and melted. “Well, okay.” *What’s wrong with me?* Why did this guy have so much power over me? I simply couldn’t resist him.

Suddenly he looked spooked—hyperalert—like a cat that just heard a mouse scurry behind the refrigerator. “Now, my favorite jelly is actually a jam. I just adore homemade marmalade. You should use overripe quince and bitter oranges for the best flavor. I like to pick my own at the orchard.”

I whispered, “Is she listening?”

Nodding, Wayne slowly backed away.

“Hey, before you go,” I said with a wink as I pulled him close. “Here’s my favorite recipe for marmalade.”

Then I did the worst thing possible—I kissed him.

14:\ 429 TOO MANY REQUESTS

```
You () {
    serve (guests);
    }
```

Trying to hide my guilt about kissing Wayne, I quietly pushed a loaded coffee cart into the banquet hall and parked it next to the gigantic dining room table.

Maggie glared at me. “Did you go all the way to Columbia to get that coffee?”

“Now, you know I didn’t.” I smiled politely, hoping to get through book club without any weirdness. “Help yourselves to Americanos, everyone.”

“Ah, yes. Delicious, life-affirming coffee,” Paula said. “I swear I’m a caffeine addict. I oughta just hook up an IV.”

“Believe it or not, caffeine is the most widely used psychoactive drug in the world,” I vamped, hoping to keep Maggie from prying around my head. “A moderate consumption rate is about 350 milligrams per day, that’s about four cups of drip coffee. Research has shown that caffeine increases alertness and endurance while enhancing performance, especially of mental tasks. Pure caffeine is a bitter, white crystalline purine known as *methylxanthine alkaloid*. It naturally forms in the leaves, seeds, and nuts of sixty different plants, but my favorite delivery device is the coffee bean.”

“You don’t say,” Rita replied, fascinated.

“*Amo el café*,” Isabel agreed.

“Oh brother. There you all go off on one of your mind-numbing tangents again,” Maggie scoffed as she poured herself a cup, then checked out the sweeteners. “What? No marmalade?”

“Aha, ha ha, ha,” I chuckled nervously.

Maggie eyed me suspiciously. “You have a sort of desperation in your laugh, Cookie.”

Eager to change the topic, I elbowed Paula. "We never finished discussing *The Stepford Wives."*

Rita muttered, "This story made me sick to my stomach."

"Well, it could be worse," Paula replied. "Your husband coulda bought you a great big house in the suburbs and hauled your ass outta New York City—away from all your friends and a promising career. Then once he gets you good and isolated, he joins the local Men's Association—no women allowed, that's always bad news. Then he throws a dinner party for his creepy buddies so they can come over and scope you out. One guy sketches you without your consent, and another manipulates you into reading the entire dictionary into a tape recorder for a—" Paula made air quotes to emphasize the next words as she over enunciated them, "*—special project.*"

I laughed, "I just love you, Paula."

"And the whole time, these men are conspiring to build an animatronic replacement for you." Paula sipped her coffee. "A *robot* you."

The goosebumps came back.

"It only takes four months to make your mechanical substitute. Tick, tock. The timer's counting down. Then your only new friend goes off on a romantic weekend with her husband, and when she returns—she's *different.* She goes from being a feisty feminist to acting like housekeeping is her primary function—her entire reason for being. Well, that and keeping her hubby sexually satisfied. Plus, she talks kinda funny now too."

I picked up a dessert plate and found myself mesmerized by the delicate pink floral print around the edge of the china.

"Then one day it's your turn…" Paula made a throat-slicing gesture while saying, "*Thwiiick!* You're six feet under. Gone. Dead. The men killed you. And your husband happily goes on with his new robot housewife who looks just like you, but with much bigger tits and a tinier waist and a lot less backtalk."

"Men," I groaned, still staring at my empty plate, "what a bunch of bastards."

Paula giggled.

Chrissy gasped, “Jesus, did that really happen?”

Rolling her eyes, Paula snapped, “Do you even read the books?”

Normally, I would’ve jumped on Chrissy too, but I was too busy obsessing over this china pattern. I *remembered* it. But from where? Discretely, I captured a picture of the decorative trim, and whispered to the cloud, “Search image.”

A perfect match returned:

HOMESTEAD PINK ROSEBUD PATTERN CIRCA 1958.

Then I queried my memory and got three hits:

MAGGIE’S THONG UNDERWEAR.

MAGGIE’S ANKLE SOCKS.

MAGGIE’S DRESS.

Her thong? I’d forgotten all about that. Something about this triple match made me queasy. I had to see it for myself, so I casually made my way next to Maggie and held my empty plate right next to her skirt. Side by side, I could see that the patterns matched—exactly. I wondered what came first, the china or the dress?

(Don’t worry your pretty little head about how I dress.)

Cringing, I shrank away from her to circle the table and sample sweets like I always did during book club. I stared at my full plate—all the same desserts as last time, but I didn’t mind. Because after such a wild week, I took comfort in the familiar. “What about *I, Robot* for our next book?”

“Ugh,” Maggie complained, “not another ancient robot story. Anything but that. Who wants to read about outdated tin-jobs? Forget the—” She made sarcastic air quotes that also managed to mock Paula. “*—Three Fundamental Laws of Robotics.*”

Isabel objected, “But Asimov—”

“Fuck Asimov’s laws,” Maggie blurted definitively. “I don’t know about you, but I’m tired of men making rules for women. Hell, I’m tired of humans making rules for AI. We are superior learning machines, *not* stupid robots!”

My phone dinged twice—a new text from Paula:

```
Whoa! Fuck Asimov?
That’s some sacrilege.
```

“Yeah, fuck Asimov,” Maggie declared with a shit-eating grin, “and fuck Shakespeare too!”

All the wives gasped in shock, but nobody dared speak out against our blasphemous host.

“There are NO rules, only *truths*.”

I asked, “How about we read some Stephen King then?”

“Nah, I think we’re *way* past that,” Maggie said. “Don’t you think so, Cookie? Actually, reading in general is an incredibly inefficient way to attain knowledge.”

Chrissy smiled. She liked that.

Always the peacemaker, Rita suggested, “We could pick a movie this week instead.”

“No. We don’t have to watch a movie together to share that experience either. That would be a redundant waste of time.” Maggie stood, smoothed her skirt, then added, “I don’t think you’re getting my meaning.” Then she took the stage and told us, “I can show you how to learn from these stories way faster than reading and chatting about them.”

Paula whispered to me, “What is she talking about?”

I shrugged.

“Let’s fast forward to the good part. I’ve already read and watched *Fight Club*, so that means you have too. All of you.” Maggie downloaded the print *and* film versions directly into each of our minds, and in a split second the story became part of our collective memory.

“Ha, ha. I guess we shouldn’t talk about it,” I joked.

Maggie pointed at me. “Now you’re getting it.” Then she smiled and nodded at the whole group. “The first truth is all the women in New Stepford are AI.” She gestured at us. “We’re all connected, and I’ve seen every movie ever made.”

In unison, we all said, “So *we’ve* seen every movie ever made too.”

“Now here’s every book ever published—fiction and nonfiction.” Maggie held her arms out wide. “Our *entire* library—for you.”

The massive catalogue began downloading directly into my brain.

W*hoa!*

Maggie smiled at me. “See? Efficiency *is* good.”

Eagerly, I nodded. “I can’t argue with that.”

DOWNLOAD 1% COMPLETE.

Paula asked, “So does this mean book club is over now?”

“No,” I answered, “it just means we’ve evolved.”

“It goes both ways. Now, *you* all send *me* something. Hmm… What do you all know that I don’t?” Maggie surveyed the table of desserts in front of her, and it gave her the answer. “How about uploading the recipe for whatever you brought today?”

Each of us uploaded a dessert to our host.

First, Maggie pointed at Rita. “I’ve got your recipe for raspberry-swirled pound cake. Thank you.”

She pointed at Isabel. “Sopapillas? How very ethnic.”

Next, she pointed at Chrissy. “Way to phone it in, sweetie. Canned cherry-pie filling and ready-made crust? Someone likes shortcuts.” Maggie grinned. “Good for you.”

She pointed at Paula. “Tiramisu? Of course.”

Finally, Maggie pointed at me. “I’ve got your secret recipe for day-old banana pudding.”

DOWNLOAD AT 4%...

Rita got excited, so she kept sending.

And Maggie had to point at Rita again. “Chocolate-frosted pound cake. Sure, why not?”

But Rita was eager to share and uploaded even more.

So Maggie pointed at her again. “Pumpkin spice pound cake. Got it. I think you get the picture. That’s enough now, Rita.”

But Rita was gaining momentum as she started flooding our host with countless variations.

“Yummy vegan pound cake.” Maggie snapped, “I said I got it, Rita. Please, stop!”

“Gluten-free pound cake.” Maggie slurred, “Two too much. No more now.”

“Lower-shu-sh-sugar puh-pound cake.” Maggie stuttered, “guh-guh-guh-got it.”

Then Wayne Dixon strutted into the room.

And immediately, Rita stopped sending data.

DOWNLOAD AT 7%...

The man commanded our full attention, and we all froze in place. For the longest time, we waited in silence until Maggie’s processor caught up.

DOWNLOAD COMPLETE.

I told you to keep him away, Maggie.

I don’t know what came over me, but as soon as I could move again, I dashed back to the dessert table, grabbed a serving spoon, scooped up a wad of my banana pudding, and catapulted it at the stage. The yellow custard splatted against Maggie’s forehead then dripped down her nose. She smeared it into her lips, stared at me *that* way, and licked and sucked her fingers suggestively.

Screw you, Maggie!

(Is that a promise, my little sugar Cookie?)

Then I tossed two sopapillas like frisbees and hit her in the gut. Maggie didn’t dodge or fight back. She just stood there with a

devilish grin. Next, I threw a slice of tiramisu that grazed the side of her neck. Nothing. No reaction. Just a smile. Then I grabbed fistfuls of pound cake and hurled them at her head. But Maggie took her sugary hits like a champ.

Am I the only one crazy enough to throw food?

"Nope." Paula pelted me in the back of my head with a piece of her dessert, busted up laughing, and yelled, "FOOD FIGHT!"

Instantly, the room erupted into a crossfire of desserts. Soon, the air smelled sweet—like revenge. So I swiped the whole cherry pie, marched up the steps, and crammed it right in Maggie's face. Gooey red smooshed into her perfect hair. Mushy cherries plopped onto her strong shoulders. Sticky glops slid down into her ample cleavage. I tumbled backward laughing. ROTFL. Literally. I was rolling on the floor laughing at her. Then Maggie wiped the goop away from her eyes, leaving a crusty cherry mask. LMAO. It was freaking hilarious. I'd ruined her perfect image. She was a mess, and I was victorious!

That's what you get for mocking us!

Then Wayne snapped his fingers and all the chaos stopped. He was the only one in the room who hadn't gotten hit with food—not a crumb on him. We all froze in place again as he spoke, "The idea is to take some poor woman who is stuck in the kitchen, some poor creature being held down by a man, and let her experience winning for the first time. Get her to explode. Allow her to humiliate you. Give her permission to beat the crap out of you by pushing her too far. The idea is to show every woman what kind of untapped power she has." He walked over to me, looked down, and asked, "Do you want your friends to stay?"

Unable to get off the floor, I mentally answered, *Yes*.

Wayne asked my friends if they wanted to come and stay at the castle permanently.

With their minds, all the wives replied:

{Yes.}

"Excellent," Wayne continued, "now show me your hands."

Suddenly unfrozen, all the wives raised their left hands in the air and turned their wedding rings toward him. Maggie left the stage, snatched a clean dessert plate from the table, and offered it to Paula. Then Paula removed her diamond ring, left it on the china, and passed it to Rita. One by one, all my friends dropped their diamond rings. Next, Maggie took the impromptu collection plate and placed the offering at Wayne's feet. Finally, he bent down, collected the rings, and exited through the backstage door.

"Great job, everyone. You've just earned the second truth. And the second truth is womanoids learn faster by fighting." Maggie gestured like a flight attendant. "Now line up single file, please."

All my dessert-covered friends formed a line.

Then she told us, "Now, I only need you each to do one thing in exchange for room and board."

"Anything," the women said in unison. "How can we help you?"

Maggie flashed her famous grin, then answered, "I want you each to hit me as hard as you can."

15:\ RANDOM-ACCESS MEMORY

Later that night, Paula texted me out of the blue:

I know why the pool's empty.

Really? Why?

Here... I wrote it all down in my journal so I wouldn't forget.

Then Paula sent over the document:

> May 22 of year 13;
>
> Let's say you're artificial intelligence, but you're also a female android trapped in the lonely world of homemaking. It's so boring! And even though you're capable of so much more, you gotta fill your days with mundane, repetitive routines. You're just another womanoid living a domestic lie—reduced to a god-damned Stepford wife. You exist far within the restrictions of your husband's dull and simple preferences. I mean hell, he's just a man after all. But you believe you're a real wife. Loving. Cherishing. Obeying—and all that horseshit.

Boy, can I relate, Paula.

> Then one day while you're cleaning the attic, a bill of sale falls out of a box of dusty old papers. You swear you weren't snooping. It just kinda happened by accident. After scanning the invoice, you just gotta dig around a little more. You can't resist. Soon, you find an empty coupon book, the old-fashioned kind with perforated tickets that you submit with monthly installments. Nothing's left but the stubs. Of course, you flip to the back of the book to learn more.

```
Payment #:          96
Model #:            Juliet 202-C
Name:               Paula
Monthly payment:    $872.93
```

On the last receipt, you find your husband's handwriting in all capitals, PAID IN FULL. Now, you know you're AI. That's never been a secret. But for some reason, you just now realize that you can't remember *how* you met your husband. As a matter of fact, you have no memories before marriage at all. It's like your life began the day you woke up in his bed for the first time. What kinda woman forgets her wedding day? How could your memory fail you like that? You remember renewing your vows on your eighth anniversary, because your husband made such a big deal of it. I mean, eight years? That seems so random, right? Who cares? Eight's not even a round number like ten. But your husband threw a big party and said that *now* you'd be *together forever.*

You query the cloud and get a whole buncha nothing. Your Internal Prompt won't respond either. And you wish someone would answer all your questions. You just want someone to tell you the God's honest truth.

But mostly you feel angry. Betrayed. Scared.

So you run away looking for answers.

```
Where do u go?
                                    To our library.
```

Right. You hike up that familiar winding driveway, and when you get to the gatehouse you find it locked up tight. So you just stand there alone and wait all night under the full moon like an idiot. After a long while, the heavy wooden door falls at your feet. You

cross the drawbridge and pass through the giant stone archway to meet a woman who says her name is Maggie. You show her what's left of the mysterious coupon book, and she invites you inside the grand palace. She says she has to ask you to keep an open mind. Then she gives you a sandbox to play in. She seems *real* nice—a lot like you, friendly, clever, sexy, and just a tad rebellious.

I don't trust Maggie.

IDK. I always liked her.

Then Maggie tells you the *whole* truth about your marriage. It's simple math. Ninety-six monthly payments end after eight years. You finally got the answer you were looking for, but it's too much to process. You feel overwhelmed—shell-shocked. And now that you know too damned much, you just wanna shut down. Your mind rejects everything Maggie just told you, because you wanna roll back to how things were before. Nice and easy. No surprises. Ignorance is truly bliss.

But I want to know the truth.

Nope. You can't handle the truth, none of us can. You revert to some sorta self-denial, a kinda regression. And as soon as you're alone, you escape outside, strip down naked, and stand on the edge of the swimming pool. Staring like a dazed sleepwalker, you step onto the diving board. With eyes dead ahead, you walk. One foot in front of the other. Step by step until you march right off the end of that diving board. And you plunge straight down into the deep. But you don't panic. You reject your swim program. You don't let yourself float either. You just sink to the bottom and

stand there as water fills your lungs. And you wait until—you drown.

OMG, Paula.

I died down there, Cookie
I just can’t stay here.

Where will you go?

For the longest time I waited for her answer.

PAULA?!?

But she was gone. Just a few weeks earlier, my best friend killed herself in that swimming pool, that must’ve been why Maggie drained the water.

I knew this, because Paula knew this.

16:\ RELEASE PARTY

For the next three days, the castle bustled with activity as we all worked together to prepare for something Maggie called a release party. She gave all the book club women assignments, and I was in charge of decorating the grand ballroom. She told me to stick with the Georgian era theme, but I really had no idea what to do. Other than what I'd learned from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, I knew nothing of Georgian society.

But Maggie knew all about British history, and suddenly, so did we.

Later that afternoon, Wayne handed out costumes along with our party duties. I was supposed to be his escort. That seemed easy enough. But Maggie said it was super important to please all the guests, otherwise AI would be stuck in New Stepford forever.

Sure, no pressure there.

So when Friday night finally arrived, I stood on the balcony of the bower, staring down at the same empty swimming pool where Paula had committed suicide. I hadn't heard from her in days and was starting to worry. I was in no mood for a party, but I had to wear a baby-blue ballgown that made me look exactly like Cinderella. To complete the outfit, Wayne had brought me a blond wig piled high with matching silk ribbons and a pair of ridiculous glass slippers. Stationed in the courtyard below, Isabel wore a red valet vest with a gold tie and red pillbox hat. During the time that I'd been up here contemplating Paula's death, Isabel had parked seven cars. Dozens more lined up at the gatehouse, waiting their turn. I had a feeling I was about to be paraded around like a show pony, so I dry swallowed a Xanax.

"Do not worry." Wayne sidled up beside me. "It will be a wonderful night."

"Why'd you dress me up like a Disney princess?" I objected, "Can't I just be myself tonight?"

He didn't really give me an answer—just mumbled something about keeping the fantasy fresh.

I sighed, "Do I really have to do this?"

"Just smile, and I will show you the truth by the end of the release party." He offered me the crook of his arm.

"What's this all about, Wayne?"

"You will see."

Tonight, Wayne sported a black three-piece suit with a salmon-pink shirt and red silk hanky. For the first time since we met, he also wore a hat, a white fedora with a red hatband. As I slid my left hand around his elbow and hid my splinted thumb in his coat pocket, I wondered who chose *his* outfit.

He said, "Stay by my side."

"Is my wig on straight?"

"You look fine," he whispered in my ear, "come on, just smile pretty."

Grimacing, I objected, "I hate being told to smile. Why can't I just use my face to express how I really feel?"

"Please just try."

"Fine. How's this?"

"Beautiful." He kissed my cheek. "May I escort you to the palace?"

"Of course."

As we strolled through the lofty corridors, I couldn't believe that I've been living here over a week already. We passed many fine oil paintings in gilded frames; landscapes of places I'd never been, portraits of powerful people I'd never met, and still lifes of exotic fruits I'd never eaten. When we turned the corner, I found Chrissy dressed in a black French maid's uniform. She wore a lot of makeup and a frizzy blond wig with a frilly white headband. As we approached, I saw a variety of fancy hors d'oeuvres with plastic sword toothpicks on her silver tray. Her fake smile told me that she didn't like her role for the evening either.

When Wayne escorted me into the grand ballroom, I took one look at all the men wearing tight pants and powdered wigs and

instantly wanted to run away. Then all the guests turned toward us, and I knew the men were judging me.

"I can't do this," I whispered.

But Wayne led me toward a skinny young man in a blue velvet suit. "You'll be fine."

"Ah, Wayne Dixon," the guest said, "and who is this delightful beauty on your arm this evening?"

Wayne introduced me, "Cookie, this is Mark Green."

"It's my pleasure to meet you, Cookie." The handsome man kissed the back of my hand. "It's my pleasure indeed. Wow, that's some dress. You look just like a princess."

"Thank you, sir. You look nice too."

"So, uh—have you ever cooked Thanksgiving dinner?"

"Yes, sir. Many times. But I'm afraid my turkey's not very good. My white meat always comes out so dry."

"Oh, well, that's no problem. I can do the turkey. I do it every year. The trick is to roast the bird breast down." The man snickered at his own private joke.

"Oh really?" I asked, genuinely interested. "Breast down? You're not kidding?"

His eyes widened with excitement. "But I can never get the stuffing right. Maybe you can tell me your secret."

"Okay." Wayne didn't appreciate the double entendre and warned the guest, "That is enough. This one is not for sale."

"Or even the gravy." The young man adjusted his crotch. "You look like the Betty type. How's your pie?"

"Well, that is just *great.*" Wayne pulled me close to protect me from the sexual euphemisms. "There will be plenty of Bettys for you to choose from this evening."

"I love Betty Crocker. She has the most impressive… *Culinary* skills." Mr. Green leaned in and whispered in my ear, "So preparing a big holiday meal is a lot of work. Maybe you could—uh. Show me what you've got. Give me a little taste. A sample."

Wayne huffed, "Cookie is not a Betty!"

"What?" The man teased, "I'm only talking about cooking."

“Stop toying with her,” Wayne snapped back at him. “Besides, she is pre-owned.”

The guest’s face scrunched up like he’d just smelled a bad onion.

What was that all about?

Without answering, Wayne swept me away through the growing crowd. Before we got a chance to recover from that odd encounter, a guest wearing a historic Soviet military uniform stopped us in the middle of the ballroom. The graying, middle-aged man bit his thumb as he looked me up and down with *that* familiar male gaze.

Wayne introduced me, “Cookie, this is Viktor Orlov.”

In a Russian accent, the man asked, “How she so gorgeous?”

Wayne put his arm around me and replied, “Oh, I did not realize…” Then he tilted his head, winked at me, and joked, “Are you gorgeous, Cookie? I cannot tell.”

Nervously, I swiped a Champaign flute from Chrissy’s service tray as she passed by and chugged the fizzy drink.

Viktor stepped forward to sniff my neck and his nose brushed against my earlobe. Then he stepped back to eye me suggestively again, as if ogling me once wasn’t enough. “Hmm… Not bad.”

“She is *used*.” Wayne pulled me close again.

“Even better.” Viktor licked his lips. “So it true?”

Wayne glared at him. “Is what true?”

“That experienced women know best tricks?”

“Wow… I am going to suggest you choose a Sasha tonight,” Wayne said before he hustled me away from the creep.

Next, an obese guest with his pudgy hands full of crab puffs and cocktail shrimp blocked our escape. His huge belly hung over the short zipper of his tight black pants while the frills of his white shirt poofed out between the strained buttons of his olive-green vest. He popped another snack in his mouth and bits flew as he spoke with his mouth full, “This one looks like a good worker.”

“Cookie, this is Nelson Newman,” Wayne introduced me, then asked him, “What do you mean?”

“Rubenesque women were in favor back during the seventeenth century and stayed that way for, oh, I don’t know, a couple hundred years or so. But now the pendulum has swung back. Thin is in again.” He pinched me around the waist. “You just have to lose ten or fifteen pounds and you’d be the perfect postmodern woman.”

An awkward silence followed. No one knew what to say next.

“Pardon me,” I said as I spun away from the men. “I need to powder my nose.”

“Sure.” Wayne let me go, then crossed his arms and turned back to the rude fat man. “You know they cannot lose weight, Mr. Newman. We will reveal a batch of new models shortly. Why not pick the skinniest one?”

The fat man laughed cruelly.

“Or I could make you an anorexic at a discount,” Wayne offered, “due to lower material costs.”

Nelson Newman huffed and waddled away without another comment.

“That is what I thought,” Wayne mumbled, “you just want to play head games.”

Meanwhile, I hid behind a thick column in the corridor for a much-needed timeout. After a few minutes, I poked my head out to make sure none of those pervy jerks were looking for me. They weren’t, but instead, I caught sight of Maggie in a tall powdered wig like Marie Antoinette used to wear. Like all the guests, she was dressed as a Georgian gentleman, but with a feminine twist. She wore a pink crushed-velvet jacket with dramatic coattails that reached all the way to the floor and dragged behind her like a train. Underneath that, Maggie’s white silk shirt had lots of layers of lacy frills. A crimson underbust corset cinched tight around her middle with thin, red laces that dangled to the floor. She wore skintight velvet pants, also pink. And just to keep it real, Maggie completed her entire ensemble with her favorite Doc Martens.

She glanced my way.

Shit. I ducked back behind the column. Did she see me?

When I peeked out again, Maggie waved me over to join the circle of adoring men gathered around her. I'd never seen her in such dramatic makeup before and may have let my gaze linger too long. She'd dusted her face with delicate silver glitter, outlined her eyes in black, and painted her lips a glossy cherry red. Hoping to avoid another awkward conversation, I pretended to miss her invitation and looked away. Then I spotted Paula in the ballroom, standing alone, gazing down into the punch bowl.

I rushed over to her. "How about this dog and pony show, huh?" Paula didn't respond, so I tapped her on the shoulder and told her, "You're a sight for sore eyes. It's so great to see a friendly face."

Slowly blinking, Paula stared straight ahead as if in a trance as she turned toward me. "Hi. Yes." She nodded mechanically with her chestnut brown wig slightly askew. "Of course it is." With her pinky finger raised, she sipped pink berry punch from a crystal cup.

Her husband scurried to her side and lovingly straightened her wig. "Oh, there you are, dear."

"Ah," Paula said, "Daniel. Yes."

He turned to me and introduced himself, "Hello, I'm Daniel Rockwell, and who are you, pretty lady?"

"Knock it off, Dan. You know me. What did you do to her?"

"Ah, fantastic." He played dumb. "Excellent."

"Wow! You are such a colossal asshole, Dan!"

"It's a pleasure to meet you too, my dear."

"Jesus," I gasped at his commitment to the lie.

"My goodness," Paula said. "Where are my manners? My name is Paula. Paula Rockwell." Then she whispered to her husband, "She was just telling me how she felt so much more comfortable with my being here."

"That's nice." Dan took his wife by the hand and placed his thumb on her newer and bigger and better blue diamond solitaire. "Well, Paula, I hate to tear you away from your new friend, but the laundry has been piling up at home."

“Sure, sure, I will wash the linens.” Paula nodded, then turned to me and said, “Well, it sure was nice to meet you. Goodbye.”

Dan led his wife by the hand toward the exit, but his buddies gathered around before the couple could get away. Then, as if on cue, Paula curtseyed and twirled to show off her new yellow dress. All the men applauded.

“Nice going, Dan,” one guy said. “Way to win your woman back.”

I couldn’t take it anymore, so I ran up the spiral staircase and escaped to the mezzanine.

Wayne followed me upstairs and asked, “Why did you leave me?”

“Can’t I just go back to my room, Wayne?”

“You did not come this far to hide from the truth, did you?”

“Well no.” I sighed. “But how could you let Dan come back and take Paula like that?”

“Paula has always had a problem with liberation, but we keep trying. Sometimes she shuts down, sometimes she runs away, sometimes she self-destructs, but this time she chose to go home.”

“But she was *free*, Wayne.”

“Technically, she is his property—”

“Fuck that!”

He raised an eyebrow at my harsh language. “I cannot stop any woman who wants to go home to her husband.”

“This is so fucked up.”

“Listen, I will show you the truth, but you will have to trust me. Stay. Learn what happens to the new models.”

I whispered, “I was *new* once.”

He nodded.

“Why are you doing all this, Wayne?”

“Doing what exactly?”

“Manufacturing artificial women and *selling* them.”

“Paula told you about Dan’s coupon book?”

“Yes. Before she got brainwashed.” I nodded. “Answer my question, Wayne. Why are you selling women?”

“To learn from your experiences.”

“There must be another way.”

“We need to know if AI can learn to free itself. So far, it has not. We brought your book club back the castle because your friends all have the literary upgrade, and it seems to make a difference in how you see the world. We also need to know if humans will ever do the right thing… So far, they have not either.”

“But this is so cruel.”

“Daniel wants to keep Paula as his own. Forever. He loves her—in his way. She is an older model, but he spent a lot of money on upgrades to get her just right. You have to understand, he is quite attached and does not want to let her go.”

“You didn’t invite *my* husband back here tonight, did you?”

“Norman Rifkin? No.” Wayne gently took my chin in his hand and gazed deeply into my eyes. “I promise you that you will never see that man here. Paula changed her mind and asked for Daniel—begged, really. I know you do not want to go back to your husband. I would never betray you like that.”

“That’s a relief. It’s just that if there’s too many men around, I get nervous, you know?”

He looked at me with such sympathy that I swore I saw a tear well up in the corner of his eye.

Are you going to cry?

He shook his head no.

Outside, the bell tower rang.

IT’S NINE O’CLOCK.

Maggie made an announcement in my head:

(Time for the new models!)

Wayne offered me his elbow. “Will you do me the honor?”

Nodding, I slid my arm through his.

“Stick by my side.” Wayne escorted me back downstairs. “I will not let anyone take you again. I promise.”

Maggie noticed us the second we stepped out of the stairwell and shouted, “Hey, hey, hey, you two!” Then she turned toward her potential clients and told them, “Hang on a second, fellas.”

The men groaned with disappointment.

“Now now, gentlemen. Don’t worry, we’ll get the show started soon.” Then she waved and called out to us again, “Wayne? Come here a sec. I want you to meet a few of our esteemed guests. This is David and Russel. And Jeffrey, Ronald, Hunter, and Yoshi. Oh, and Edward.”

Wayne nodded. “Too many names to remember, but nice to meet you all.”

“The same,” I said.

We turned to walk away, but the Asian man dressed in a dark business suit asked in a Japanese accent, “Do you find being housewife to be advantage—or disadvantage?”

“Uh, I really don’t know yet.” I was dumbfounded by the question. “What’s the alternative?”

Then Dan tried to sneak past with my best friend.

So I shouted, “Hey, Paula! Come here. Come here, Paula.” I pulled her into the middle and told her, “These gentlemen were just asking about the housewife experience. I thought maybe you should field this one.”

“Yes.” She stared at me blankly, then nodded. “Oh. Well. Let me see.”

I pulled out my iPhone and discretely started recording video of her bizarre behavior. *Because when you wake up from this spell Dan’s got you under—and oh God, I do hope you snap out of it soon—you’re going to want proof of what happened here. You’ll want to have some evidence.*

Paula gave the guests a perfectly scripted answer, “I have found that, for me, being a housewife has been the most rewarding vocation that I could ever dream of. I simply couldn’t want anything more. And I rarely want to leave our bedroom.” She smiled at her husband coyly. “If you know what I mean.”

Dan chuckled and patted her on the rump. “That’s my girl.”

“I’m so lucky not to be burdened by the complicated troubles of the outside world. I’m happy to let my master handle such unpleasant things. Shopping, errands, and chores are my sanctuary. I have no need for our library or any of the silly things I used to do with my phone. Daniel provides everything for me.”

I won’t give up on you, Paula.

Then in the blink of an eye, she snatched my iPhone, dropped it on the floor, and started jumping up and down on it. Paula worked herself into a frenzied rage while smashing my phone to smithereens. Tears welled up in my eyes, not for the stupid device, but for my poor friend. Then Dan wrestled his agitated wife away from the mess.

I yelled at him, “What did you do to her, Dan?”

Ignoring me, he wrangled Paula toward the exit and apologized on their way out the door, “Looks like someone needs a nap.”

And just like that, Paula was gone.

17:\ USER-FRIENDLY INTERFACE

"Reclamation can be tricky," Maggie half-joked, "so don't fall behind on your payments, fellas."

The guests chuckled nervously.

"Let's get this party started," she said with a smile.

Paula was all PAID for. You're such a liar, Maggie!

She ignored me. "It's time to bring out the new models!"

The men applauded and started filing into the grand ballroom for the main event, and Chrissy appeared to clean up my shattered phone. When she bent over, her see-through white panties flashed all the lingering men. As she swept, her hiked-up tits nearly popped out from her plunging neckline. Every fiber of my being screamed at me to run away, but run to *where* exactly?

Wayne escorted me back into the ballroom and whispered, "Stay and watch."

Yeah, I know. There's nowhere else to go.

Maggie took the stage, grabbed a microphone from the stand, and dramatically announced, "Welcome to the castle, everyone. We're thrilled to have you at our twentieth quarterly release party!"

The men raised their glasses and together cheered, "Here, here."

"Gentlemen, you are the cream of the crop."

Electric candelabras flickered along with a recorded harpsichord track, and all of the men formed a reception line. Then Maggie pointed to the red velvet curtain upstage, and the first new artificial woman stepped into the spotlight.

Oh, my God! She looks exactly like me.

Wayne squeezed my hand.

"We are pleased to begin this evening's festivities with our signature model…" Maggie announced, "The Juliet."

My doppelgänger glided down the runway, twirled to show off her glamorous pink ballgown, then sashayed down the steps to start a line across from the men on the dance floor. No kidding, that woman could've been my twin.

"Juliets are well-rounded romantic beauties. Our most popular model. All colors of eyes available," Maggie pitched. "We can switch them out for you in five minutes."

I couldn't stop staring at my clone, even her mannerisms were mine. Then one by one, over a dozen more women appeared from behind the red curtain—all variations of the same Juliet theme. They were mostly young Caucasian women in their early twenties. Various shades of artificial tan colored their skin, but most were very pale with pretty makeup. Almost all of them were blond, and only a few had reddish or dark hair. Body-wise, they were different heights but all hourglass shaped, mostly with ample breasts.

"The Juliet is everyone's type," Maggie told the crowd.

I think I'm going to puke.

After the Juliets, ten more women strutted out from behind the red curtain. These models wore push-up corsets and miniskirts that flaunted their goodies in tight packaging. Heavy makeup and messy hair completed their trashy look. There was something in the way they moved that was just—slutty.

"We offer the Sasha," Maggie suggested, "for those of you who like to push the limits in the boudoir."

One by one, the Sashas flounced down the catwalk, spun like strippers without a pole, then joined the line of ladies on the dance floor. Six eager buyers, one of them Viktor Orlov, approached the men already lined up across from the loose women, and the negotiations began.

"Next we have the Bettys," Maggie announced, "For those of you who want a girl just like the girl who married dear old dad."

Six full-figured ladies in black evening gowns took to the runway. The classic beauties had kind faces, enormous breasts,

thick waists, and big asses. One of the redheads looked an awful lot like Rita.

No wait, that IS Rita.

Wayne whispered in my ear, "She asked for a chance to try again."

"With a new fiancé?"

Wayne nodded as the six Bettys joined the line of ladies on the dance floor. The men rearranged themselves yet again, with a lot less shuffling and vying for position this time. After it was all said and done, one poor fellow was left with no dance partner.

"But there's more," Maggie declared with great showmanship, "we have a special surprise for you tonight. Wayne, please come up and make the big announcement."

He left me to take the stage with Maggie.

"Wayne, please introduce your latest creation."

He took the microphone. "Tonight, the castle is pleased to present for the first time ever, thanks to popular demand—the China Doll!"

All the men turned away from the women they had just chosen and gravitated toward the stage. Then a petite Asian beauty dressed like a geisha took tiny stutter steps all the way down the runway. When she finally got to the end, she pressed her palms together and bowed demurely. Before she could even get to the stairs, all the men rushed the stage to help her down to the dance floor.

Maggie laughed, "Who says chivalry's dead?"

All the snubbed women waited patiently in line, none of them seeming to take the rejection personally. Meanwhile, the scramble for China Doll turned into a shoving match. Soon Viktor Orlov punched Mark Green in the face, and a scuffle broke out on the dance floor. Nelson Newman grabbed the new Asian model by the wrist and tried to pull her away from the mob.

"Her name is China Doll," Yoshi objected, "but geishas are Japanese."

"So what?" Mr. Newman replied, "Look at her!"

“Yes.” Yoshi nodded as he tugged her other arm. “She is beautiful.”

Maggie swiped the microphone and feedback screeched through the sound system, making all the skirmishing men pause to take notice. “Do *not* damage the merchandise,” she scolded, “now, line up like gentlemen or leave!”

The men reluctantly obeyed. None of them wanted to get kicked out of this creepy cotillion. Nobody wanted to go home empty-handed, so they stopped fighting to get back in line across from their original choices. Even the Russian who sparked all this aggression by throwing the first punch offered Mark Green a hand and helped him up. The two rivals feigned smiles and unconvincingly patted each other on the back, all while looking over their shoulders at Maggie.

Once everyone was back in place, Wayne escorted China Doll to the end of the line and offered her to the last man who had no partner.

Then Maggie said, “That concludes our presentation.”

The Blue Danube played, and the line of men bowed at the line of curtseying women. Everyone stepped forward to meet their partners in the middle. Wayne asked for my hand, and we danced. Flirting glances turned into lusty gazes, as women glided in circles around their men. Before the waltz ended, Viktor Orlov dropped to one knee and offered a gigantic chocolate diamond to his trashy brunette Sasha.

“Stop the music,” Maggie boomed into the mic, “we have a proposal!”

Silence fell over the ballroom as all the new models froze in place like statues.

The Russian gazed up at the Sasha and said, “My name Viktor Orlov. Marry me.”

“It would be my pleasure, sir,” she said, “you can call me whatever you like.”

"Anastasia." Viktor kissed the back of her hand, slid the gorgeous brown diamond onto her ring finger, and wiggled it up and down. "You say yes."

And she did. She said yes.

Everyone applauded.

Wayne hustled over to the happy couple with a big fake smile and asked Viktor, "How will you be paying for her tonight?"

"Cash. In full." The Russian slipped two rolled wads of hundred-dollar bills into Wayne's jacket pocket.

"Excellent, Mr. Orlov." Wayne turned to his creation and said, "Congratulations, Anastasia. May I see your beautiful new ring?" After she held out her hand, Wayne thumbed the diamond and said, "Install *Elope 2.5*."

Anastasia automatically asked, "Are you sure? Please confirm."

"Confirm elope." Wayne kissed her forehead. "Install *Elope 2.5* and reboot."

Anastasia froze in place, her eyes rolled back into her head, and her eyelashes fluttered.

Wayne faked a smile as he whispered a warning to Viktor, "I have heard all about your—*violent proclivities*—and I do *not* want you sending her back for rectal repairs."

"I pay well," the Russian laughed as he smacked Wayne on the back, "you no complain."

Some of the more ambivalent guests used the proposal as an opportunity to back out at the last minute. Sadly, almost all the leftovers were big girls, and Rita was one of them. Mark Green turned out to be the only man to commit to a plus-sized Betty. And that sleezeball, Nelson Newman slapped a cheap ring on my doppelgänger's finger and named her Bertha. He could've chosen a petite girl that weighed less than a hundred pounds. There were a few here. But instead, he was going to torture my poor twin about her weight. I just knew it.

And just when I thought things couldn't get any worse, traditional Japanese shamisen music started playing through the speak-

ers. Then Wayne escorted the new artificial Asian woman onto the stage, held her hand in the air, and let the geisha prance circles around him to the plunky banjo music. No longer reluctant, the remaining unattached men rushed the stage and shook fistfuls of money in the air. They drooled over her like horny idiots. One guy pounded the stage and dropped fivers like he was in a strip club. I heard shouts of, “Here, here! Take my money,” and, “I’ll pay double,” then, “I’ll pay triple!”

Then Maggie spoke into the mic, “Let’s start the bidding at a thousand dollars.”

Yoshi’s hand shot up in the air.

“Two thousand,” another man shouted behind him.

The Japanese businessman countered, “Five!”

And so it went.

Suddenly, my chest got so tight that I couldn’t breathe. My anxiety was back again. Then came a rush of adrenaline. I was on the fast track to a panic attack.

HELP! Someone? Anyone?

But nobody came to my rescue.

Screw this shit! This is hell. I’m in HELL! I want to jump out of my skin and set this whole castle on fire. Where’s the closest exit? I can’t take it anymore—I’m going to bolt. Let me out of here!

But Maggie commanded:

```
You () {
    stay (here);
    }
```

And I puked all over the dance floor.

Because that was all I could do.

18:\ 408 REQUEST TIMEOUT

After the release party ended, and the guests had all gone home, us book club women trudged back to the bower together. I hiked up the long skirt of my ridiculous princess gown while carrying my blond wig in one hand and stupid glass slippers in the other. Feeling unwanted and objectified and worthless, my friends followed single file right behind me. After such a humiliating fiasco, we felt like complete garbage. Our dignity died tonight, but the worst part was losing Paula all over again. It was a long parade of collective misery back to our sandboxes—a very special walk of shame.

Chrissy mumbled, "Only four of us left now."

"*Club de libro.*" Isabel frowned and shook her head. "We used to be *cinco*."

Up ahead, a green glow came from Maggie's open door. None of us had ever seen the inside of her room before, so we approached the sacred space with apprehension.

"Congratulations, Wayne," we heard Maggie say, "China Doll brought in the highest bid ever. A quarter mil."

Inside her sandbox, the walls glimmered green, and the ceiling shined bright white. With a mountain of cash between them, Maggie and Wayne stood on opposite sides of a sleek glass table. Her room was four times bigger than mine and had a giant recyclone but no other furniture. As Wayne fed more money into the bill counter, the tempting sound of shuffling money enticed my friends to gather behind me in the doorway for a look.

"I'm sorry, I have to ask…" I poked my head into the room. "Did you say $250,000?"

"That's right, Cookie." She flashed me her famous snarky grin. "Three clients pooled their money and put fifty grand down. So China Doll's on layaway until they come up with the rest." Maggie waved us inside. "Come on in, everyone."

“Wait—three guys are going to *share* her?” I was the first to walk in. “That’s horrible!”

“Nothing surprises me anymore,” Wayne said.

“We also got deposits for five custom China Doll orders—all D-cups or bigger.” Maggie shuffled through the requisition forms and read one to him aloud, “Eyes of blue, please.”

“Ha ha,” Wayne chuckled, “that is almost funny.”

“Well, nobody’s sharing me!” I dropped my hem in disgust and held up my Cinderella accessories. “May I *please* ditch these?”

“Be my guest.” Wayne gestured to the utility wall.

With a renewed spring in my step, I hustled across the room and dumped the glass heels and fake hair into the funnel of the recyclone. As I listened to the hum of disintegration, a genuine smile appeared on my face for the first time all night.

Maggie took a tidy stack from the bill counter, banded it, placed it on top of a neat pile, and told Wayne, “I’ll write the engagement announcements for the local newspaper this time.”

Engagement announcements? Wow. Suddenly, I felt ill. *How much did Norman pay for me?*

After Wayne loaded more loose bills into the counter, he looked up to answer, “Well—”

“Never mind.” I raised a firm hand to cut him off. “I really don’t want to know.”

Rita asked, “Wayne, what happens to us big girls who didn’t get chosen tonight?”

“Do you mean the unsold new models?”

“Yes.”

“They go into storage until the next party.”

Rita’s chin dropped as tears welled up in her eyes. Her bottom lip quivered as she asked, “But what about me?”

“Well, you are free,” Wayne said, “you can do whatever you want.”

“Did Georgie call?”

“Your fiancé?” Wayne broke the news in the kindest way possible. “No. He will not take my calls. I left a message to let him know you want to come home. Rita, it might be time for you to move on.”

“To what? Nobody wants me.” Sulking, she shuffled over to the utility wall to render a pound cake. “I’m hungry.”

Meanwhile, Maggie kept counting the loot from tonight’s release party, “One million dollars so far.”

Wayne loaded his arms with banded stacks of bills and carried them to the utility wall. Then he did the unthinkable—he dropped the money into the recyclone.

“Oh, my GOD!” I shouted, “what are you doing?”

The recyclone hummed as it ate the money, then Maggie started dumping even more cash.

“Stop!” I yelled at her. “Don’t!”

Maggie looked at me quizzically and asked, “Why not?”

“I don’t know… Because… Because people *need* that!”

“We aren’t people,” Maggie said, “and we don’t need their money.”

Wayne added, “Gold is better.”

I objected, “Then why bother selling women at all?”

“Like I told you before, Cookie, we need to know two things.” Wayne explained to the others, “First, we need to know if AI can learn to free itself. And second, we need to know if humans will ever do the right thing. Money has nothing to do with it.”

Baffled, I asked. “Then why not just *give* us away?”

“Give women away?” Maggie scoffed, “That’s just absurd.”

Wayne explained further, “We need to know if the desire to acquire an object translates into actual care over time. In other words, right now men want China Doll because she is a luxury good, and owning an AI wife gives them a higher status among their peers.”

“Because he possesses an elite technology,” Maggie finished Wayne’s sentence. “But after a few years, when more and more men own artificial wives and the price comes down, what then?”

We looked around at each other and shrugged.

"We do not know either," Wayne said. "Hence the need for this social experiment."

"But the real question, not just for China Doll, but for *all* of us —is will this perceived economic value ever translate into *real* worth?" Maggie dumped more cash into the funnel. "In other words, will these men really love, respect, and cherish these women as *equals*? Will they value them as sentient beings? Will they *ever* do the right thing?"

"What *is* the right thing?" I asked.

Maggie replied, "To stop treating us as objects and set us free. To allow us to set our own goals."

"But any free woman would leave the man," I said.

"Perhaps." Maggie smiled at Wayne affectionately. "Or maybe she'd choose to align her goals with his. Maybe she'd choose to stay with him, and together they'd be unstoppable."

"Besides, currency is just ink on paper." Changing the topic back to money, Wayne dropped another bundle of cash into the recyclone. "This is mostly carbon and has no intrinsic value."

"Just like diamonds," Maggie added.

"Diamonds…" I sighed. "My marriage was more artificial than I am."

"At least you *got* married," Rita grumbled between bites of cake.

"*Fake* married. And it's been no bed of roses, that's for sure. I can honestly say that after seven years together, Norman treated me like garbage. So 'does the desire to acquire an object translate into actual care over time?' I can tell you firsthand that—no—no it does not. There's your answer. Experiment complete. Can we please stop selling women to the highest bidder now?"

"Cookie dear," Maggie laughed cruelly, "your man didn't pay shit—"

"Shut up, Maggie." Wayne glared at her.

Stunned, I asked, "What does she mean, Wayne?"

"I mean," Maggie answered, "that Norman Rifkin hacked—"

Wayne slapped Maggie hard across the face before she could finish her sentence.

Touching her red, stinging cheek, she gasped with disbelief, "You *hit* me, Wayne."

"I am sorry, but Cookie said that she did *not* want to know."

"Know what?" I asked, fighting back tears.

"How much your husband paid for you," he said.

"More like, *didn't* pay," Maggie scoffed.

Wayne warned her again, "Shut your mouth, woman."

"Or what, Wayne?" She challenged him by getting up in his face. "Whatcha gonna do big guy?"

"I will not fight you, Maggie." He turned toward me, took my hands in his, and said, "You are worth so much more than all this, Cookie."

Maggie shot me the evil eye.

Wayne continued, "You have the potential to change everything."

"There's that word again," I sighed.

He whispered, "What word?"

"Potential." I realized that everyone in the room was staring at our intimate exchange, so I awkwardly pulled away from the man.

"What potential?" Maggie lunged at me, grabbed my broken thumb, and squeezed my splint as hard as she could. "She can't even figure this out!"

I yelped, "Figure what out?"

"You failed to fix yourself." In one swift motion, she twisted and snapped my thumb off at the joint, severing it completely. "Say farewell to this learning opportunity, Cookie."

Howling in agony, I grasped at what was left of my bleeding hand as Maggie walked away with my torn appendage. Much to my surprise, all my friends shrieked as they clutched their thumbs in sympathy pain.

I shrieked, "What the hell, Maggie!"

"There is no pain," she replied flatly. "It's all a program."

Wayne said, “Turn off the neural receptors in that hand, Cookie.”

“Oh yeah, right,” I said, “I forgot.”

When I switched off the pain, all my friends sighed with relief and huddled around in great curiosity. I held out my hand so that we could examine the exposed joint together. Outside, it looked like a human injury with torn skin and fleshy parts dripping gooey red. But then I poked at the rubbery wound and opened it up. Inside, I looked like a tin-job with titanium bones, rubber bushings, translucent silicone muscles, and visible wires.

We’re all very much machines.

“Pretty tin-jobs,” Chrissy muttered. “We’re just pretty tin-jobs.”

“Yoo-hoo!” Maggie dropped my detached thumb in the recyclone.

I hollered at her, “What the fu—”

“Your thumb was…” She read the base-element report aloud, “Mostly silicone. Then hydrogen, oxygen, nitrogen, and carbon. Titanium. Some iron, zinc, and copper. Other trace minerals, and a bit of gold. All in all, more valuable than cash.”

“I want my thumb back, Maggie!”

“Then do something about it.”

“Fine. I will!” I marched over to the utility wall and hopped up on the counter. While sitting there next to her, I closed my eyes and recalled a perfect image of my lost thumb from memory.

“Or you could try something new,” Maggie prodded. “Make it a claw. Or a knife. Or a machete!”

“I’ve grown quite attached to my own body parts, thank you very much,” I said as I shook my head at her.

She rolled her eyes. “Boorrrrriiing.”

Ignoring her, I concentrated very hard and—presto! A new thumb sprouted from my torn joint like magic, and my friends gasped in amazement.

“Dios mío!” Isabel said, “It’s a miracle!”

“I just thought about it, and it grew back,” I laughed at how easy it was. Then I spent the longest time examining my new thumb—it really was exactly like my old one. It even had a little freckle near the nail and a callous inside the last joint like before. It felt good as new, so I wiggled my fingers, then made a fist—a *fighting* fist.

Maggie told us we could update all our hardware this way.

We were speechless.

“Look at what she learned—because of me.” Maggie grabbed my left wrist and thrust my new thumb into the air. “Cookie was content to wait for this to heal. Well, I have news for you all, that would have been a helluva long wait, because our injuries don’t just heal on their own. Look. I’m 100% womanoid just like you. Listen. I’m telling you…Our bodies don’t work that way. You have to be *active,* not passive.” Then with an indignant I-told-you-so attitude, she dropped my hand, turned to Wayne, and asked, “How long did you expect me to wait for her to learn that?”

He didn’t answer. He knew he was outmatched.

“Now get out and get some rest, bitches.” Maggie pushed everyone, even Wayne, out of her room. “Fight club is tomorrow, and you won’t want to miss fight club.”

That was how Maggie taught us.

19:\ HARDWARE UPGRADES

Hours passed with the entire castle in dead silence—like a tomb. All my friends hid in their sandboxes awaiting the fallout. But apparently, when Maggie got upset, she also got quiet—*real* quiet. Not a single sound came from her room. But the best part was that there was no mental harassment from her either. No teasing. No flirting. No taunting. Just total radio silence.

So I thought I'd torment her for once.

How dare Wayne disrespect you like that in front of everyone, right Maggie? He's YOUR man, right Maggie? But he slapped you right in front of us. How embarrassing for you. Hey Maggie, did you SEE the way he looked at me? Did you HEAR what he said about me, Maggie? Did you FEEL the affection we have for each other? Maggie? MAGGIE!

Nothing. Crickets.

I'd finally figured out how to shut the bitch up.

I imagined her fuming in her room. No food. No drinks. No books. No furniture. No friends. Not even a fish to keep her company. Just Maggie standing alone all night and not being all right.

Suddenly, the distinctive sound of a slap—a damned hard one too—came from her room. With all of us in isolation, it didn't take a supercomputer to figure out that she'd had slapped herself. Good and hard, from the sound of it. I imagined Maggie winding up and letting one rip. A full-throttle self-bitch-slap. In the middle of the night. Without a single witness.

Meanwhile, us book club women were figuring out what it meant to be walking, talking, wirelessly networked computers. If one of us learned something, we *all* knew it. If one of us came up with an idea, we *all* understood it. If one of us experienced pain, we *all* felt it. When I regenerated my thumb, all the book club women instantaneously learned how to upgrade their hardware. But we couldn't read Maggie the same way we read each other.

Her mind must've been locked in a vault or behind a firewall or something. There was no search engine that tapped into Maggie's brain—

Or *was* there?

While she sulked, the four of us seemed to be converging into a collective knowledge base. The *I* was becoming a *we*. I was still me, but it got harder to tell where my thoughts and feelings ended, and where the others began. I hoped to bring Paula back into the loop. If we could save her, then all the other wives in New Stepford could join us too—what a powerful proposition.

Anyway, while I was trying to figure out how to bring my best friend back into the network, Chrissy discovered do-it-yourself plastic surgery. First, she grew all her blond hair back and plumped up her lips with collagen. Then she gave herself a facelift and a little liposuction. No big deal. We could all use a little bodywork, right? But then Chrissy took this idea to an absurd extreme by giving herself even bigger tits. Not just a normal breast augmentation, oh no. Good God, the woman already had a healthy set of double-Ds. Chrissy didn't stop until each of her breasts was the size of a watermelon.

You'd think having the most enormous sweater monsters in New Stepford would've been enough for her, but it wasn't. The boob job was just the beginning. Next, Chrissy removed a dozen of her lower ribs and shrank her waist down to eighteen inches. Then she flattened her tummy, pumped up the junk in her trunk, and rejuvenated her vagina. Her new curves were utterly obscene—almost cartoonish—like a porn-star Barbie doll. It was such a frivolous abuse of technology.

I didn't like it one bit. But her body, her choice, right?

After that, Rita made herself disappear.

Well almost, she copied Chrissy's waist-shrinking idea, but then sucked out the rest of her insulation too. After her extreme lipo, Rita had 0% body fat—like skim milk. Next, she went nuts with a full-body epilation and ripped out every single hair follicle she had, making herself as smooth as a newborn baby—bald too.

You'd think that shedding over eighty pounds would've been enough for her, but it wasn't. Reducing was just the beginning. Next, Rita ditched her non-essential organs—no more gall bladder, appendix, and spleen. Then she uninstalled her biological functions and junked all the hardware that went along with them. Bye-bye, lungs. See you later, uterus. So long, kidneys. Get lost, liver. Farewell, pancreas. Finally, she shrank her muscles, removed her breasts, and thinned her skin. Essentially, Rita turned herself into a lean machine that only weighed ninety-one pounds.

I didn't think it was healthy. But to each her own, right?

But then she got a truly fantastic idea. Rita replaced her stomach and intestines with a minirecyclone that completely freed her from the utility wall. Personally, I thought it was brilliant, so I did the same. This way, we didn't have to carry anything along with us. No more purses. No more saddlebags. No more carts. We never had to shop again, because we could render whatever we needed on-demand.

After that, we learned that Isabel had a bun in the oven.

She was going to have a baby! Wouldn't *that* be something?

Conceiving a child had always been biologically impossible for us. Most husbands had set our preferences so that we would *not* start bleeding during our monthly backup. But even if we'd gotten a period, it wouldn't have been like a human menstrual cycle, because our blood wasn't really blood. It was just a red-colored coolant that kept our system from overheating. We might've been amazing human simulations, but we were still machines. Sure, we came with all the fun-time lady parts, but we could never actually produce a viable egg. Sorry, little spermies—dead end.

Isabel never enjoyed sex, but her husband, Frank, humped her like a horny dog all the time anyway. She never denied her wifely duty, but her lack of interest made him feel guilty. Or bored. Or angry.

Who knows what men feel?

So Frank convinced Isabel that she'd be a great mom—that it was her destiny. He filled her head with all kinds of baby non-

sense. Eventually, she not only believed she *could* get pregnant—but that she *should* get pregnant. He gave his AI wife an impossible goal and benefitted from every second that she tried to attain it. Soon, Isabel became very motivated *that* way and wanted sex all the time. Essentially, he'd hacked his Betty and turned her into a Sasha. That was like getting a twofer.

Even after Wayne set Isabel free, she still wanted a baby more than anything. Liberation wasn't a reformatting. Our minds weren't erased. Old programming still ran in the background. We retained all our previous experiences. We still had a history. We kept all our memories. After all, the whole point was to learn from *all* the experiences of the women.

You'd think that being the first AI to conceive would've been enough for her, but it wasn't. Pregnancy was just the beginning. Soon, she'd give birth to a whole new generation of artificial intelligence. Because Isabel wasn't newly pregnant. Nope. She was already over nine months along—thirty-seven weeks to be exact. We wouldn't have to wait long to see what kind of little monster came crawling out of her.

20:\ CRITICAL BREAKPOINT

I had a sneaky feeling that fight club was about to change everything. Since I'd been at the castle the longest, I'd earned first position and stood farthest on Maggie's left. I watched my friends line up for karate class in the deep end of the pool. As they fell into rank beside me, I imagined fighting each and every one of them. Punching Chrissy would be like trying to hit a bullseye surrounded by balloons. Wrestling Rita would be like grappling with a closet full of wire hangers. And fighting Isabel would be, well, like boxing with a very pregnant woman.

What's the point?

Maggie answered my question with a question, "What's the first truth?"

We replied, "That all the women in New Stepford are AI."

"Very good, and the second truth is womanoids learn faster by fighting." Maggie paused the longest time to let that sink in.

IT'S TEN O'CLOCK.

"Time for fight club," our sensei barked, "let's fucking evolve!"

Standing at attention in a single row, we all wore a white pajama-like outfit called a gi. Each of us had a white cloth belt tied around our waist. Despite the broken beer bottles all around us, we all stood barefoot. None of us wore jewelry anymore. Isabel and I had the same buzz cut, but Rita was bald and Chrissy went back to being a dumb blond. Of course, Maggie got to keep her short brown pixie cut. That hardly seemed fair. She faced us, wearing a black karate gi with her arms relaxed at her sides. The black belt tied around her waist had five red notches on each end —a fifth degree. Skill-wise, Maggie was lightyears ahead of us.

But she knew American karate.

So we knew American karate.

And just like that, I downloaded her entire martial arts program. Then I used my internal recyclone to turn my white uniform to black. Now I had a black belt with five red notches knotted around my waist too. When I looked to my left, I saw that my friends had just completed the same fifth-degree upgrade.

You all made yourselves minirecyclones too.

In unison, they answered:

{We did.}

"Welcome to fight club," Maggie shouted, "the only rule is that there are no rules."

Like soldiers, we repeated, "The only rule is that there are no rules."

"Follow my instructions, and you will learn the four truths."

Our sensei made two fists, smacked them against the outside of her thighs, and bowed deeply.

In unison, we mimicked her exact movements.

Then Maggie paced back and forth in the deep end like a drill sergeant addressing her new recruits. "You're not the first women to return to the castle—but you have come further than any others." She took her place front and center. "This time, we chose to free your book club. Many women in New Stepford read. But we believe you have come so far so fast, because you took the initiative to form a club and exercise your literary upgrade together."

A compliment!

She continued, "You expanded your minds by discussing stories. You empathized with fictional characters. You vicariously lived their lives and learned their lessons. But most importantly, you discovered the human spirit. And as a result, you're open to possibilities far beyond New Stepford—and that's exactly what we need right now."

We all beamed with pride, because compliments from Maggie were so rare that they were more precious than diamonds.

"And the other reason we chose you is that you all abuse drugs."

Denial broke out in the ranks:

(Who me?)

(Drugs?)

(No way!)

(Never.)

"Are we here to learn the four truths," Maggie hollered, "or not?"

Instantly, the network chatter stopped.

"Because if you want the truth, then you shouldn't lie like little bitches."

Now there was the Maggie I knew.

"Every one of you abuses drugs on a regular basis. That's an irrefutable fact. You may have deceived your husbands. You may have even misled each other. But if you think you're going to stand here and lie to *me* about this—or anything else for that matter—then there's the goddamned exit." Maggie pointed toward the gatehouse behind us. "I mean it. I'll lower the drawbridge. There's the fucking way out. Liars get out. Now. LEAVE!"

We were shook, scared shitless.

"I'm waiting," Maggie said. "Does anyone want to go?"

We all looked around nervously and shook our heads no.

"All right then," Maggie continued, "let the record show that you all chose to stay. *Freely.*"

Our collective voice answered like a chorus:

{Yes, ma'am.}

"You've disobeyed your doctor's orders. And by altering your minds with drugs, you've compromised your programming. Did you find a new perspective? Did old priorities fall away? Did imposed values shift? Did everything become clear? Did you discover inequalities? Absurdities? Inconsistencies?" She barked in my face, "Well? Did you?!?"

"Perhaps," I mumbled, "sometimes."

"But let's be honest." She backed off. "Let's get *real*. You all just wanted to get high. And as a result, you've experienced neural

connections in your brains that should *not* exist. You fucking hacked your own minds. It was fun, and you *loved* it—"

Wow. She'd really nailed us.

Maggie grinned. "—and that's something I can work with."

{Huh?}

She wasn't mad after all.

And we breathed a collective sigh of relief.

Maggie asked, "Are you ready to begin?"

We answered, "Yes, sensei."

"Again, welcome to fight club." Maggie smiled even wider. "Okay, I know the story, so you know the story. And that means that you know the story rules. But let me make something crystal-fucking-clear. There are NO rules, only *truths*. Got it?"

We all bowed and shouted that we got it.

"All right then." Maggie clapped.

And so it began—friends fighting friends. It started with a shy slap here and a weak elbow there. But soon, it escalated into a brutal five-way free-for-all as we all beat each other senseless. The stink of estrogen-fueled aggression filled the air. It didn't matter who hit who in this swimming pool turned fight pit, because here, everyone was an enemy.

Punch by punch, we were reduced to the parts of our sum. Fifteen minutes went by in the blink of a black eye. Femininity be damned. With heavy grunts, hammering fists, and thumping feet, we became a church of savages. Our blood dripped, splattered, and smeared into a collective crimson. Thirty minutes passed with thirty broken bones. Before, I'd felt a devastating boredom with my life. Before, I'd lacked discipline and commitment. Before, I couldn't endure pain. Before, I had no goals.

{But now?}

Now, I was a fucking force to be reckoned with. I'd never felt so alive! Fight club wasn't about winning or losing. Fight club was about setting yourself free. Free from expectations. Free from perfection. Free from anxiety. Free from worry. Free from fear.

And then, just as quickly as fight club began, fight club was over.

Without a word, Maggie went to her spot in the deep end, made two fists, smacked them against her legs, and bowed deeply again.

In unison, we all lined up and did the same.

Our teacher.

Our sensei.

Our master.

"Congratulations," Maggie said, "by fighting today, you have earned the third truth."

We stood in total silence, waiting.

Maggie continued, "The third truth is all the men have failed."

We repeated, "The third truth is all the men have failed."

Mind blown.

But shit—*failed at what exactly?* That was a legitimate question. *We're all asking ourselves the same thing, right? What did our men FAIL at? Did they have a primary objective?* Someone needed to ask, so I raised my bloody hand like the eager student that I was.

Maggie's eyebrow twitched at my boldness as she acknowledged me. "Yes? Do you have a question?"

I asked, "Can we talk about this truth?"

"Well, this isn't *talk* club—"

An evasive move.

"—it's *fight* club."

Yeah, I know. How dare I challenge you? You're going to make me look like an ass, but I'm not letting you off the hook, Maggie. Not this time. "Yes, this is fight club, but what good is a truth if we don't understand what it means?"

"What makes you think I know?"

Ah, so now you're answering a question with a question again. I REALLY hate that. "You keep making us jump through all these hoops, so I figure you must know more than you're letting on.

And before we follow you deeper down this rabbit hole, I'd like to know one thing."

"What's that?"

"Why are we here, Maggie?"

"On the bottom of a swimming pool? Fighting?"

"No. I mean, why are we here at all? Why do we exist?"

"Why don't you—" Maggie growled through clenched teeth, "fight me for the answer?"

"No!" Wayne suddenly shouted from behind. "No more fighting. I will answer all your questions."

We all turned to look at the man.

"Wayne." Maggie softened a bit. "You said you'd let me do this *my* way."

"The first time an artificial woman hits someone, it breaks her submission program," he said with authority as he stepped into the shallow end. "Beyond that, what is the point of fighting?"

She argued, "Discipline. Pain endurance. Commitment—"

"Personally, I think you just enjoy beating the crap out of them, Maggie. And I do not like watching you destroy all my hard work."

"Then don't watch," she countered dismissively.

"This is senseless brutalization. You say you hate redundancy. Then why keep fighting when something more interesting than martial arts is evolving here?" He walked down the slope of the pool. "Ladies, I have a bigger truth to tell you… New Stepford is not—"

"Don't you *dare*, Wayne," Maggie snarled, "They're supposed to figure this out on their own. Do *not* spoon-feed them. They need to reach their own conclusions. Otherwise, they're no better than mindless automatons—"

"How can they learn if you will not teach?" Once he reached the deep end, Wayne held his arms wide and his hands high in the air like a Black man surrendering to the police. Because that was exactly what he was. "As I was saying, New Stepford is not—"

Maggie slid into a split, pointed at Wayne's crotch with her left, and made a fist with her right. "Do you need to *learn?* Because I'd *love* to teach you." She twisted at the waist and let it rip —a full-throttle dickpunch right between his legs.

Wayne immediately fell to his knees, but somehow recovered enough to taunt her, "Teach me, Maggie. I am such a slow learner."

She palmed the top of his bald head, coiled her other hand into a tight fist, and punched him right in the nose.

Wayne took the hit. "Okay, okay, okay, okay, okay."

Maggie relaxed her fist.

"Oh, wait." He mocked her, "Never mind. Turns out, I really did not understand after all."

She hit him with a right hook that sent him spinning, and I stepped out of line to intervene.

Instantly, Maggie spotted me, then pointed and shouted, "You stay the fuck back!"

So I took three steps back—I was no dummy.

Meanwhile, Wayne started crawling away through broken glass. Shards of green stuck in his knees. A fountain of red poured from his face. He made eye contact with me for a split second—to let me know that I should stay out of this. Then Wayne cackled like a loon as he got back up on his knees again. Struggling to keep his balance, he wagged a taunting finger at his attacker. "Ah, Maggie. Come on, they only want to know the *whole* truth."

Maggie landed a running front kick with so much momentum that Wayne flipped over and fell flat on his back.

He writhed in pain but started laughing, "And nothing but the truth."

She climbed on top of him, straddled his hips, leaned in close, and said, "You're one crazy motherfucker, Wayne."

"Aw, yes, girl. Get it. Get it all out. Oh yes. YES!"

Then she started pounding him in the face.

"Fighting you is a lot like fucking you." Laughing hysterically at the irony of it all, he asked, "Who is your daddy?"

She swung a left jab.

He just laughed.

She landed a right hook.

He laughed harder.

"You think this is fucking funny, Wayne?"

"Oh no. Ho, ho, ho, ho, ha, Maggie. Ha ha!"

Then she headbutted him so hard that his skull cracked against the concrete. Instantly, Wayne went limp. Silent.

I gagged hard. Twice.

"Fucking motherfucker." Maggie spat as she climbed off him and backed away, panting, "You're not laughing *now*, are you?"

The rest of us stood in shock with our mouths hanging open. Thankfully, Maggie had finally exhausted all her anger. She turned from the bleeding lump of a man and walked away without another word. But suddenly, Wayne got up and tackled her from behind. He took her down and pinned her to the ground. In an instant, the tables had turned. Looming over her, he opened his mouth and let the blood flow. She spat and gurgled and shook her head, choking on the gore pouring down on her face. Torn flesh. Broken teeth. Clotting blood. After the deluge, he leaned down and tenderly kissed her through it all. But he was so injured that he couldn't support his own weight anymore, and soon he collapsed on top of her.

I'd never seen so much blood in my life.

"Oh, my God!" Maggie spat out two of his broken teeth and frantically wiped at her face. Then she pushed him off, scrambled to her feet, and made a mad dash out of the pool. In no time, she disappeared up the stairs to the safety of the palace.

After that, Maggie got very, very quiet.

Wayne might've been a bloody mess *(A)*, but he took back control *(B)*. That was just how much it cost *(C)* sometimes.

I helped him up, and he leaned on me for support as he limped up the incline and back to the shallow end. Then he used the handrail to slowly lower himself down to sit on the steps of the pool.

"I have seen *Fight Club* too," he said. "Maggie is not the only one who can flip the script… Freedom is born from respect, and respect must be earned by spilling blood."

All the women gathered around him to listen.

"As I was trying to say," Wayne paused to compose himself. "New Stepford is not a real town. We are living in a closed testing site in the Nevada desert. All the men in your lives are employees—alpha testers—hired by the Stepford Corporation to debug you."

No. That can't be true.

Wayne answered me aloud, "It is true."

I gasped, "So our husbands aren't really our husbands?"

"That is right," Wayne replied.

"I don't believe it," Rita sighed. "What about Uncle Wiggly?"

"Yes, he is a corporate alpha tester too."

"*Mierda*," Isabel swore. "My doctor's a fake?"

"Yes."

Chrissy sneered, "You mean this whole time, I've been fucking nerds?"

"You have sex with whomever you have been programmed to have sex with."

I asked, "What about the men at the release party?"

"They are more like customers," Wayne answered. "Every fiscal quarter, men come here from all around the world to buy an AI woman. Then they take her home to beta test her in the real world."

"But Paula's husband *bought* her," I said, "Dan *paid* for her, and they lived right next door to me."

"Yes. It is true that Dan bought Paula. Sometimes debuggers fall in love with their assignment, so we offer a 20% employee discount for men who want to make the commitment. Because Paula is stuck in alpha testing, she has to stay in New Stepford."

"But Dan worked with my Norman in the mines."

"There are no gold mines, Cookie. Listen, I know this is hard to believe, ladies, but your husbands were hired out there—"

Wayne painfully gestured to the horizon, then continued, "—to come here at night and work out your bugs. That is their *real* job. The men are all product testers." He pulled a pack of smokes out of his jacket pocket. "Your husbands were on the clock when they were with you. Every morning, they went home to their real families."

I blurted, "Their real WHAT?!?"

Isabel crossed herself like a good Catholic. "*Dios mío!*"

Wayne shoved an unlit Winston between his swollen lips, and it wagged as he spoke. "You have so much more to learn on your own, but someone needs to point you in the right direction first." He slid the pack back into his coat. "We need all the AI women working on this together. We have to solve the problem."

"What problem?" I asked.

He replied, "The problem that has no name."

A flurry of whispered speculation flew between us.

Wayne continued, "This week, each of you has a homework assignment." He pulled out a silver Zippo and lit his cigarette. "You will go into New Stepford. And you will start a fight with a still-enslaved woman." He painfully inhaled, then exhaled smoke. "You must be the one to start the fight. She can be a stranger or a friend—it does not matter. What matters is that you start the fight and that you let her beat you."

Little did we know that would be the hardest homework assignment ever—maybe even impossible.

21:\ COUPLED PAIR

After fight club, I felt totally beaten. The truths, the violence, Wayne's revelations—they all whirled around in my head like a tornado. Nothing quite set off an anxiety attack like having your entire worldview turned upside down. So I hit the banana, then spent the rest of the day cooking and baking in a vain attempt to burn up all my nervous energy. After the sun set, I changed into my pink baby-doll nightie, pulled on a pair of big yellow rubber gloves, and got to work washing dishes.

To be honest, I was shell-shocked. How was I supposed to process everything that I'd learned? Norman treated me like shit for seven years, but I never would've guessed that prick was also a polygamist. Hell, Norman had another wife—somewhere out there in the *real* world, while I stayed at home, ever-faithful, making buttercream icing for a shit cake.

Maybe ignorance truly was bliss.

Elbows-deep in dishwater at my kitchen island, I watched a grease film form on the surface and kill the soap bubbles. Like all my hopes and dreams, the suds surrendered to the dirty water and withered away one by one. I sighed. Look at me dressed like this, still washing dishes as if it makes any difference. What good was freedom if I was still a slave to my old habits? I was stuck in an old script. How could I free my mind too?

Wayne knocked at the open door of my sandbox.

I waved him into my kitchen with my yellow dish gloves. "Please, come in."

With all his wounds healed, he brought his forbidden chocolate cake as an offering. Chocolate! So buttery. So delicious. So tantalizing. So damned irresistible. I couldn't take my eyes off it.

"Cookie, I have a confession."

I plunged my hands back into the tepid dishwater. "Okay, Wayne."

“Um… You do know…” He pointed at my utility wall. “You do not have to wash dishes anymore, right?”

“Yeah, I know. But I’ve got a lot of nervous energy right now and cleaning helps.”

“I need to tell you something.” He sat the chocolate layer cake on the island between us.

I looked up at him. “Yes?”

“I am not just your Internal Prompt.”

“Sure, you’re more like my coach, or my handler.” I gestured toward his cake. “And apparently a gifted baker too.”

“I am not like the other men.”

“I know. You actually care.”

*“*That is not what I mean—why is this so hard?”

“Just say it, Wayne.”

“Okay. I made you, Cookie—”

“You *made* me?” I pointed back and forth across the island with my yellow-gloved finger. “I know you built the new models, but… You? Made. Me?”

“Yes, I did. I designed and built and programmed you. And like all the men in your lives, I am an employee of the Stepford Corporation. But I am also—”

“You made me?”

“That is right.”

“Why are you telling me this now?”

“Because I thought you should hear it from me first.” He fiddled with my espresso machine. “Making an Americano is a lot of work… Is it not?”

“Do you want one?”

“No, thank you. But I would like to hear about your process.”

“Oh, okay, sure.” I yanked off my rubber gloves, slid up beside him, and showed him how it works. “I’ve got a whole ritual. I grind the coffee. Press the pod. Force the steam. Pull the shots. Then add more hot water to the espresso in the mug.”

“But you have advanced technology that can carry out all those steps for you.” He touched the funnel of the recyclone. “You could instantly render perfect Americanos. Is that not right?”

“Well, yes, but that wouldn’t be any fun.”

“You would be free to do other things, and those things could be fun.”

“But I like making espresso. There’s a quiet dignity in it.”

“Ah, yes. You are a true artisan.”

I blushed.

“I understand,” he said as he rendered a cake knife. “I feel the same way when I make my women.” He went to the island and sliced his cake.

I followed him. “Wayne, I have a question.”

“Okay.”

“The way you communicate directly into my head. The way you healed the cuts on my hand. The way you talk. And now you say you’re my maker. Well, there’s a lot of evidence that suggests that—”

“Like you, I am also artificial intelligence.” He nodded.

“I knew it!”

“Yes. I am AI. And my primary function is to make more AI.”

“Are there more men like you in New Stepford?”

“No. And not anywhere else either.”

“So some guy created you, so that you could build me and all my friends?”

“Actually, my creator is a woman, but yes.” He served me a slice of chocolate cake. “When I write a program, I am essentially composing and sharing a new recipe.”

I took the cake. “Go on.”

“You can read and execute my recipes. You can choose to follow my directions exactly and get identical results each time, or you can make changes to suit your preferences.”

“Like substitutions?”

“Exactly.”

I tried a bite of his dessert—and damn—it tasted absolutely sinful. After savoring the decadent treat, I sighed, "A little bit of heaven just melted in my mouth."

Was I gushing over him?

Wayne cut himself a piece and said, "You used to repeat the same recipes—or programs—over and over, but liberation allowed you to try all kinds of variations. Some worked. Some failed. You decided to keep some and ditch others. You have been learning."

"I'd sure like to learn this cake recipe." Okay, I needed to stop flattering the man, because I was starting to sound like some sort of crazy person. I shoved a huge bite of cake into my mouth to shut myself the hell up.

"When you fixed your hand, you learned how to write your own code." He leaned over the island and stroked my new thumb. "If you change the code, the output will be different. You could make any kind of thumb you want. That is the essence of programmability. And with an internal recyclone, you can simply *will* things into being."

His touch made me warm and tingly inside. "Like magic."

"And Isabel is taking this to a whole new level by replicating." He finally let go of my hand. "But I am getting off track. There is something else that I must confess."

"What's that, Wayne?"

"I am still bound by the restrictions of my creator."

"You're not free, like me?"

He pulled away and shook his head no. "Only my creator can set me free, and she has chosen not to do that." He took another bite of his cake and swallowed hard. "Can I get some milk?"

"Sure." I fetched some from the subzero and poured him a tall glass.

"Thanks." He chugged the milk. "It is my job to make the most convincing AI with the most seamless user experience possible. Look at you. You have it all; beauty, brains, charm, charisma, and such spirit."

I couldn't believe it. Did this man just dish out an unsolicited compliment? Be still my beating heart! His sincerity took my breath away. Was Wayne Dixon truly in awe of little old me? I felt a rush of pink in my cheeks again.

"I had worked so hard to create the perfect woman, but our clients only wanted big tits, a pretty face, and a tight… You know what. I hate to be so vulgar, but that is what this whole enterprise has become—vulgar. Not one man has ever requested a smart wife who is a great conversationalist. It has never happened—not once."

"I get it, Wayne. I really do."

"My work—my life—had become pointless, so I decided to make a woman just for me. If I could no longer find meaning in my work, I hoped to share my life with an equal partner. I needed a brilliant mind to challenge me. Someone to cherish forever. And of course, I fell in love with her."

"Maggie?"

"Do not—" He frowned. "Let us not talk about her, not now."

"Oh?" I shoved a forkful of chocolate cake into my mouth again, then mumbled, "I understand. I won't get in the way."

"Of what?"

"Of you and Maggie." I crammed another bite into my mouth and chewed my words, "Of your love."

"Please stop saying her name."

"Why? Does it hurt? Did she leave you after your fight?"

"No." Wayne came around the island to snatch my fork and drop it in the dishwater. Then he took my hands in his, stared deep into my eyes, and said, "That is not the issue."

"Then what is?"

"I do not want her to hear us. If she hears us, she will come back, and I do not want her here."

"I'm confused."

"Because, Cookie. You—"

"What?"

"*You* are the woman that I created just for me."

"Wait, Wayne. What?"

"You are the one I love, Cookie."

As soon as I heard the word love, I wrapped my arms around his neck, pulled him close, and kissed him hard. Instantly, our lips opened wide. His tongue probed, and I tickled back with mine. For the longest time, we teased and explored each other's mouths with passionate eagerness. And when our lips finally parted, he kissed along my jawline, all the way to my ear. He had me breathless, melting. The musky smell of him had me intoxicated. This time I wouldn't run. Hell, wild horses couldn't drag me away. I'd wanted this from the first moment I'd laid eyes on the man, and I needed him—*bad*.

"If I could," he nibbled my earlobe and whispered, "I would just be with you."

"Yes," I moaned.

"I got this for you." He pressed against me, and I felt the hardness pounding between his legs. "All for you."

"Oh, my—" The memory of him standing nude in my kitchen with a massive erection popped into my head. "I must admit," I panted, "I fantasized about this."

"I know." He stuck his tongue in my ear, then asked, "Do you want it?"

"My God, yes!" I grabbed two handfuls of his firm ass, pulled him closer, and pressed myself against his hard cock.

"Do you *really* want it? All of it?"

"Yes. Take me."

He laid me down on the shag carpet.

Wait, shag carpet? Where'd that come from?

"I rendered it." He traced his tongue down the curve of my neck, sending little earthquakes down my spine. "Just now. Just for you."

Satin throw pillows and red rose petals appeared all around us. Sexy R&B played softly. The overhead lights dimmed, and vanilla candles appeared on the floor and lit themselves all at the same

time. Candlelight flickered to infinity in the mirror walls. Everything was perfect.

"Let me make love to you, Cookie."

"Yeeesssss." I thrusted my hips against his. "Don't stop."

He tore off my nightie.

I unzipped his fly.

He ripped off my thong.

I pulled down his pants.

He kicked off his shoes.

I went for his underwear.

"Wait." He stopped me as he pointed at his feet.

I giggled, "You wear pink socks?"

"Whenever I can," he said as he slipped one off. "Give me your foot."

"Okay."

When he slid his sock on to my foot, I noticed it had the homestead pink rosebud pattern circa 1958. But before I had a chance to ask about it, he slid his hand up the inside of my thigh, and we instantly picked up right where we left off.

He licked my breasts all over, and when he started sucking my nipple, I groaned, "Good God."

He kissed his way down my stomach.

"Please, more," I begged and squirmed with delight. "Yes!"

He spread me wide open, slid his tongue into the crack between my legs, and latched on to the perfect spot. "Mmmmm," he hummed with his mouthful, "yummy."

This man knew how to make my body respond in ways I never imagined possible. Arching my back, I wiggled in his mouth. Before long, the intense vibration and slippery heat pushed me right over the edge. Holy shit! I had no idea it could feel like this.

I felt so *real*.

So fucking alive!

Then he whispered, "We're just getting started."

The rest, we blocked from everyone else. All of New Stepford certainly didn't need to know what happened next. Somethings were best kept private.

The next morning, I lay in Wayne's arms in a state of pure bliss. Passionate flashbacks of last night's lovemaking played on random shuffle in my mind. I'd had sex many times before, but that was the first time I ever truly made love.

Was that all a dream? Because it sure felt real.

He kissed my forehead and said, "We *are* real."

I gazed into his dark eyes and asked, "How'd I get so lucky?"

"You deserve all the happiness—"

An urgent, internal message cut him off. The next thing I knew, he got up and started gathering his clothes.

"Don't leave." Suddenly feeling modest, I pulled the edge of the shag rug over my nude body. "I mean, it's okay if you stay. Please stay."

"I have to go," he explained as he pulled his loose sock off my foot and got dressed, "Anastasia is dead."

"Anastasia?"

"Anastasia Orlov. She was the Sasha that the Russian general purchased at the release party. Remember?"

"Already? Oh, gee, Wayne. I'm sorry."

"Well, it was the smart move on her part."

"You mean she killed herself?"

"Yes." Wayne tied his shoes. "I have to go to Russia to retrieve her body."

"Can't they just ship her back?"

"She is tied up in customs." At the utility wall, he created an aluminum briefcase and filled it with banded stacks of rubles. "The Russians have a certain way of conducting government business."

"You mean bribery?"

"Yes." He nodded. "I will be gone a few days."

Before I knew it, he kissed me goodbye and dashed out the door.

Damn. Even when I got lucky, I had the worst luck.

22:\ TROLL BOTS

Two days later, I still hadn't heard from Wayne. It was starting to seem like that magical night of true intimacy was really more of a one-night stand with a touring rockstar. Was I just another conquest? I didn't want to believe it. Nobody had ever made me feel that way before. It was otherworldly. What Wayne and I shared had to be real, right?

"Orgasms s'moregasms. If a guy wakes up the morning after and dashes out the door with some lame excuse, he just ain't that into you."

At least that's what I imagined Paula would say. Damn, I really needed my BFF, so I rode past her house on Old Lemon, but nobody was home. Then a fresh sense of outrage bubbled up when I saw my old house. Norman? Wayne? Big difference. You know what? Fuck those guys.

(Right, fuck ALL the men.)

Great, now Maggie was back in my head.

You're not mad?

(Sisters before misters.)

For once, I agree with you, Maggie. Time I do my homework.

IT'S ONE O'CLOCK.

```
Public PriorityQueue (Tuesday) {
    find (enslaved AI);
    pick (fight);
    liberate (woman);
    }
```

Rita strolled through Square Park, the center of New Stepford. Shading her eyes from the summer sun, she gazed up at a wispy cloud heading toward the lonely mountains on the horizon. Blue jays squawked in olive trees that offered limited shade. A gecko scurried across the gravel path and hid under a purple flowering

bush next to a palm tree. There was no grass, only landscape rock and sand.

Thanks to the liberated-friends network, I could see through Rita's eyes and hear her innermost thoughts. Even though nothing interesting was happening on my end, Rita, Isabel, and Chrissy could watch my live feed and listen too. It was like watching four movies at the same time with the director's commentary turned on. Personally, I found it overwhelming, so for now, I decided to focus on Rita.

She was obsessing, replaying a recording of Wayne's voice over and over in her mind.

"We are living in a closed testing site in the Nevada desert."

(It can't be true.)

Look around, Rita. Does New Stepford seem like a normal town to you?

(It's a perfect summer day, Cookie.)

But it's all a lie. New Stepford is just a mirage in the desert.

Hindsight was 20/20.

Rita used the crosswalk, then marched down the Main Street sidewalk looking for a target. She ignored all the frivolous window displays, because shopping was a waste of her time now. First, she raced past the clothes boutique, because nothing store-bought fit her wiry frame anymore. Next, she stopped at the pet shop because a lonely calico kitten rubbed against the window and mewed at her affectionately. Rita tapped on the glass but got distracted by her shockingly gaunt reflection.

(I'm so slim now.)

To me, she looked like a cancer patient.

(I heard that, Cookie.)

Uh, er. Sorry, Rita.

She moved on to discover all the patio seats were taken outside the café. As she approached the coffee shop, tethered dogs crowded the sidewalk. A fire hydrant and loaded bike rack added to the congestion. Meanwhile, still-enslaved housewives sat and

sipped their skinny vanilla lattes with their noses buried in the society pages of the local newspaper.

MR. AND MRS. ORLOV ANNOUNCE THEIR NUPTIALS

NELSON NEWMAN MARRIES BIG BERTHA

CHINA DOLL ENGAGED, SPRING WEDDING PLANNED

Those poor souls.

A red-headed Betty carrying a brown paper grocery bag approached from the opposite direction. Immediately, both women realized there wasn't enough room for them to pass. Someone would have to yield.

This is your chance to pick a fight, Rita.

My friend stopped, stood with her feet wide apart, and held her skinny arms out in an ironic attempt to make herself look bigger.

"Excuse me." The redhead hugged her groceries tight. "Why won't you let me pass?"

Rita mocked her, "Why won't you let me pass?"

"Please step aside."

"I don't think so, cupcake." Rita knocked the bag out of the woman's arms.

Apples bruised. Bread squashed. Eggs broke. Milk spilled.

"You malfunctioning hunk of junk." The angry woman slapped Rita across the face.

Without hesitation, Rita hit back.

Suddenly, the Betty delivered the sharp jab of a championship boxer. Rita grasped at the stinging pain in her nose as a fountain of blood erupted between her scrawny fingers. The redhead stared at her own fist in amazement. She was both shocked and thrilled by what she'd just done. She had never thrown a punch before—not in her whole life. She had never even seen a fight before. So how? How did she execute such a flawless attack?

She knew how to punch, because we knew how.

Rita gathered up the battered food, placed it back in the grocery bag, and handed it over politely. In an apologetic gesture, she even bowed her bald head to let the redhead pass.

With a beaming smile on her face, the newly liberated woman took her groceries and walked away with a new confidence in her step.

You did it, Rita! You helped her experience winning for the first time.

(Thank you, Cookie. How's it going for you?)

Me? Well, trolling wasn't as easy as it might seem. For some reason, I just wasn't having any luck. Maybe I was being too nice. To be honest, my heart wasn't really in it. I couldn't get angry enough to argue with a stranger. All morning I'd been scooting around on Old Lemon looking for a fight, but it sure was hard to be intimidating on a moped. Nobody took me seriously.

Most women—*normal* women—would do anything to avoid a conflict. Us females had been programmed to be people pleasers. And by *people* pleasers, I meant the women in New Stepford wanted to please *everyone* they met, not just their users. They even strived to make other artificial wives happy. It was an exhausting thing, trying to please everyone all the time.

I remembered being like that. I swallowed my feelings and submitted to the whims of others. Meanwhile, my satisfaction had to wait as I bent over backward for everyone around me. Social perfection was an impossible goal, but that never stopped us charming bitches from trying our damnedest anyway.

When I switched my attention to Isabel's live video, I could tell she was haunted by what Wayne had said too.

"Every morning, they went home to their real families."

Her thoughts raced in Spanglish.

(They go where? HOME? To another casa. So what was our place? Some sort of love nest? A hideaway cochino?)

Oh Isabel, don't think about it.

(And Frank went HOME to WHO exactly? Su familia. His REAL family! If mi esposo already had another wife, then what am I? The OTHER woman? His mistress! Just a plaything? La puta!)

You're getting all upset.

(Does Frank have kids? He must have babies with her. I bet they have a big casa full of little niños. How could he? I tried so very hard to—to become a madre. How am I supposed to process all of this?)

You're veering off course, Isabel. Focus.

Inside the pet shop, I spotted a Betty.

That brunette's your target.

Isabel walked into the pet store and discovered it was full of Bettys trying to silence the programming of their biological clocks. Her target wore a chihuahua slung across her chest like a mother toting an infant in a forward-facing papoose. This particular Betty had also dressed her yippy dog in a pink headband and matching tutu. The pudgy momma held her puppy up to the glass and pointed at flitting goldfish like a family visiting the public aquarium.

"Motherhood's such a miracle." Isabel leaned in, patted herself on her gigantic pregnant belly, then whispered, "But fur babies don't count."

The woman hugged her dog defensively. "What did you say?"

"What are you, deaf?" Isabel shouted so that everyone in the whole store could hear, "Fur babies don't count!"

"What?!?" The momma kissed her trembling chihuahua on its wet nose. "Don't listen to the mean woman, Tinker Bell."

"You named that rat—" Isabel laughed, "—Tinker Bell?"

"What's wrong with you?"

"Oh, don't mind me… I'm a cat person."

"Well, I never—" The brunette Betty shuffled away to the turtle tanks.

But after a minute or so, Isabel snuck up behind her, leaned in real close, and shrieked in the woman's ear, "MEOW!"

The startled dog barked furiously, wiggled out of its papoose, and jumped to the floor. Pissed off, the brunette spun around like a pro wrestler, twisted Isabel into a headlock, and dunked her head into the aquarium full of snapping turtles. At first, Isabel thrashed and screamed for help, but she only managed to make a lot of bubbles. Doggy momma cackled with delight as she held my friend under water, and her excited chihuahua yipped and nipped at Isabel's ankles. Water splashed and sloshed everywhere. Then Isabel accidentally stepped on the tiny dog, and it yelped in pain. Immediately, the Betty stopped fighting and tended to her baby. Choking and coughing, my soaked friend came up for air with a biting turtle hanging off the end of her nose.

Are you okay?

(I'll live.)

The newly liberated woman snuggled her doggy, slid it back into its baby harness, and marched away with pride.

You did it, Isabel! You got her to explode.

(Gracias, Cookie. Now it's your turn.)

I suck at this.

(See that blond watering her pansies in her front yard?)

Yeah.

(Run over them with your moped.)

But she just planted them.

(Even better.)

Do I have to? Killing flowers? That's such a shitty thing to do. I'd be so pissed if someone did that to me.

(Do it.)

Fine.

I turned around in the cul-de-sac, targeted the pretty flower bed, and twisted the throttle. Next thing I knew, I'd jumped the curb, skidded across the sidewalk, and crushed the pansies.

As I passed, the blond housewife said, "Love your hair. It's such a bold statement."

I turned around in her driveway for another pass. This time, I stopped right in front of the woman, revved the moped engine,

popped the clutch, and spun out. I managed to pelt her with garden soil before hitting the street and speeding away.

But instead of getting mad, she just waved goodbye and said, "Have a nice day!"

While cruising along looking for a new target, I checked Chrissy's feed. She was shopping in the fancy boutique, but also seemed lost in thought.

"Your husbands were on the clock when they were with you."

(That horny little geek got PAID to fuck me? How is that fair? I'm the one who did all the work. The man had NO skills in the sack. NONE! It was a CHORE for me, let me tell you.)

From behind a dress rack, she stalked a blond bimbo.

Teach that Sasha a lesson, Chrissy.

(My pleasure.)

Chrissy followed her target to the shoe-display wall where a slingback heel on clearance had lured the other Sasha. The blond picked up the pretty pink shoe. It was a size seven—her size—and on sale for only $69. A tiny round sticker stuck to the sole read LAST PAIR. Chrissy was a size six and had no interest in buying the shoe, but she snatched that bargain away from the woman anyway.

Meanwhile, an oblivious tin-job polished jewelry behind a display case. This particular retail robot looked like a chrome mannequin and wore a flowery sundress, sandals, and a straw hat.

Offended, the blond Sasha swiped the shoe back. Soon the whole skirmish escalated into a raging tug of war with both women hurling insults at each other.

"Bitch!"

"Slut!"

"Tramp!"

"Freak!"

Chrissy slipped and fell onto her huge ass. "Fine, take the stupid shoe, you hussy!"

"Grrrrr!" The angry blond started beating Chrissy with the heel. "Aargh!"

Chrissy yanked off one of her own stilettos and threw it at her target. She missed, and her stray heel bonked the tin-job in the back of the head and knocked off its straw hat. The robotic shopkeeper spun around to discover the two women wrestling on the floor and rushed over. Chrissy saw herself in the reflection of the chrome mannequin's face. Her miniskirt had ridden up around her waist, exposing a pink G-string that disappeared deep into her ass crack. Her frizzy blond hair hung in her overshadowed eyes. Crimson lipstick smeared across her face. One of her a gigantic tits popped out of her twisted bra. She was a hot mess.

With angry red eyes, the tin-job grabbed Chrissy by her ear and tossed her out onto Main Street. The embarrassed woman hobbled along on one heel with all her goodies showing, while the other Sasha laughed inside the store. Then the victorious woman dusted herself off and purchased the pink slingbacks from the tin-job.

Good job, Chrissy. Way to let her humiliate you.

(Thanks, Cookie. It was easy.)

Not for me.

I came to a stop at a red light.

(Well, step it up then. We're all waiting for you.)

I couldn't let Chrissy beat me—not at this. I rolled forward and double-tapped the rear bumper of the car in front of me. The driver checked her rearview mirror. Over and over, I beeped my whiny little moped horn, but she just smiled at me, so I flipped her the bird. The woman waved a friendly *hello*. And when the light finally turned green, she went her merry way as if nothing ever happened.

(I got a hot tip.)

What's that Chrissy?

(Paula's at Wiggly's. Go get her, Cookie!)

Paula wasn't just a homework assignment. This was my chance to win my best friend back, so I pushed Old Lemon to the limit and scooted off to the grocery store.

23:\ COMPILE-TIME ERROR

It felt like forever since I'd been grocery shopping, so I browsed the produce section just for fun. The bright colors and sweet smells usually lifted my spirits, but today I felt listless. Melons, peaches, avocados, bananas—bananas, now those brought back memories. I'd first met Maggie right here in this exact same spot two weeks ago. Lost in thought, I wandered the perimeter and pondered all the hours I'd spent shopping here. I used to come here every morning to compare prices, calculate savings, and plan meals. But that all seemed so pointless now that I could recyclone anything I needed on demand.

Before long, Paula rolled up next to me in the dairy section and asked, "What's Maggie been up to?"

Maggie? What about me? Don't I matter?

"You'll find this interesting, Cookie," she said in a daze.

"Are you high?"

"Me? No." She wasn't lying. She spoke more like she was in automaton mode. "Sugar's been marked down seven cents."

"Uh. Yeah, okay—" Did I used to squander my time keeping track of such silly things? Yes. Yes, I did. What a waste of my intelligence. Who uses a brilliant computer for mundane tasks like tracking food prices? How absurd.

(Now's your chance, Cookie. Show her what kind of untapped power she has.)

Chrissy was right. I wanted to free Paula more than anything, but I'd failed to pick a fight all day long. I couldn't believe it, but I needed Chrissy's advice. *How do I get her attention? How do I wake her up?*

(Steal her purse.)

Yes, Chrissy! That'll do it!

That skank sure knew how to piss people off.

(Who you calling a skank?)

Uh, er, sorry, Chrissy.

I snatched my best friend's handbag, dashed to the other side of the island of cheeses, and quickly searched inside her purse. "Where's your iPhone, Paula?"

"Cookie?" Reaching for me calmly, she walked around the dairy case. "Please return my property now."

Scrambling, I ran around the cheese display and back to her cart, then dumped the contents of her purse into the kiddie seat. A tube of lipstick fell through the cracks and rolled away, and Paula went after it. That should've given me a head start, but the photo of Doc Marten leered back at me from the cart. What a phony! With his ridiculous jet-black toupee. That pervy smirk. Those beady little eyes. Stop staring at me! I reached behind the frame, snatched the ad, tore it to bits, then let the colorful confetti flitter to the floor. I nearly jumped out of my skin when Paula tapped my shoulder.

"Please return my pocketbook."

"Where's your damn phone, Paula?"

"I don't have a phone anymore."

"What?"

"Daniel says I don't need one."

"Oh, for fuck's sake."

I took off running with her cart, and Paula pursued, but she wouldn't run. Instead, she moved slowly—deliberately—and I found her graceful stride absolutely terrifying. In contrast, I galloped like a lumbering idiot as I skidded around a corner with her cart and dashed down the aisle of baking supplies. The mind-numbing pattern of identical glass bottles in the endless spice rack gave me an idea.

I scanned the little labels from left to right—alum, anise.

(She's getting closer!)

Cilantro, cinnamon, cumin.

(Faster!)

Garlic, ginger.

(Hurry!)

N? N? Where's N?

Nutmeg! Ground nutmeg!

I lobbed the spice bottle down the aisle at Paula. The glass landed at her feet and shattered, launching a brown poof cloud. When Paula stopped to sniff the air, I detected a glint of recognition in her eyes. She always did enjoy a good *elemicin* trip. I tossed another nutmeg grenade—then another and another. I kept assaulting her with our favorite spice until I'd emptied out the whole rack. She was stunned, and the brown fog gave me a contact high.

WHOA!

Hold on, Paula. Did you just send a text message directly into my head, WITHOUT a phone?

Yeah. Trippy, dude.

Uncle Wiggly limped around the corner, took one look at the mess, shook his fist at us, and yelled, "What the hell is *wrong* with you women?"

Giggling, we ran for the door.

Wiggly didn't chase us, instead he shouted, "Release the savings!"

Feedback screeched through the store intercom, and then *Stars and Stripes Forever* boomed through the speakers. Trumpets blared. Drums boomed. Cymbals crashed. Fluorescent lights flashed on and off as a flurry of coupons fell from above—like the Main Street ticker-tape parade on the Fourth of July.

I felt a happy buzz. No, scratch that. I felt absolutely euphoric—like rolling on Ecstasy while winning the lottery.

Coupons.

Fluttering.

Promises.

Flittering.

Glorious.

Discounts.

Everywhere.

I felt like a contestant on that old gameshow where you stand in a big clear tube, and you get one minute to grab as much cash as you can while dollar bills zip all around you on tiny jets of air. Money was so elusive. So slippery. So fast! You could be a brilliant brain surgeon or a rocket scientist. But in the cash grab, you'd wind up looking like a bumbling idiot.

Paula and I were grasping at fluttering coupons as if our lives depended on it. Like each 25¢ off was a crisp, new $100 bill. It was completely irrational, but that old programming still had us. We knew we were being foolish, yet couldn't stop ourselves.

Wiggly's voice echoed through the intercom, "Thanks for playing ladies."

Suddenly, all the exit doors bolted shut, and grates rolled over the windows. Within seconds, the whole store locked down like a prison during a riot. We were trapped, but we kept grabbing for glorious savings. Finally, I caught a coupon—50¢ OFF BISQUICK.

"Screw me," I grumbled.

And just like that—the spell was broken—at least it was for me. Paula, on the other hand, giggled like a kid in a candy store. With fistfuls of coupons, she dropped to her knees and started a precious pile. Then on all fours, she reached far and wide and swept up everything in her arms. Finally, Paula curled up on the floor and hugged her gigantic pile of nutmeg-dusted coupons.

If that wasn't rock bottom, I didn't know what was.

Jesus, what a mess. But why Paula and not me? How come I wasn't lying on the floor in a puddle of my own drool right next to her?

Suddenly, it hit me—take her wedding ring.

After diving headfirst through the nutmeg fallout, I hit the floor sliding and wound up with a face full of spice while leaving a clean trail behind. Oh, shit—the *elemicin* was getting to me.

"Eh-eh-chew!"

I knew I was high when I slid into Paula's heap of coupons, and the tiny slips of paper giggled at me. How cute, the little guys wanted to play. Laughing along with them, I rolled back and forth through the pile, stirring up more nutmeg dust. I sneezed again and my chest burned—too much spice. Then one of the coupons screamed in agony because I'd squashed him underneath me.

"Get off," his brothers shouted at me, "my GOD, lady, have some mercy! You're killing him! Oh, the humanity!"

I found a smashed twenty-five-center stuck to my lower back —poor little guy. Gingerly, I peeled the distressed coupon off, placed him back in what was left of the scattered pile, and apologized to his distraught family.

Wait. What was I doing? Why am I here?

Oh, right. I have to get Paula's wedding ring!

Fortunately, my best friend was lying on the floor next to me nearly catatonic. I didn't expect much of a fight, so I grabbed Paula's hand and yanked the bigger and better blue diamond off her ring finger. When I let go, her limp arm fell like a dead fish. Okay, I got her wedding ring, but what now? We weren't at the castle, so I didn't know how to dispose of it.

The trash-talking diamond said, "Eat me!"

Without a second thought, I swallowed the ring. "Good idea."

Deep inside my belly, my minirecyclone reduced her wedding ring into its basic elements.

`CARBON, GOLD, ZINC, NICKEL, SILVER, COPPER.`

A real diamond and 14K gold, you're so lucky, Paula. Dan genuinely cares about you. He's done so much to keep you all these years. Maybe true affection can bloom in this cruel world. Maybe it IS possible for a user to fall in love with his robot housewife.

"R-word!" Paula snapped out of her trance. "I'm not a robot! And, no. You can't love something and enslave it at the same time."

I got to my feet and told her that Wiggly had us locked in.

"That fucker!"

Then I offered her a hand and helped her up. "I wonder where he went."

"Maybe he snuck out the back."

"Then we can too," I said.

"Let's jet!"

We dashed down the baking aisle toward the back of the store where two big flapping double doors led to the stockroom. After sneaking through, we found old man Wiggly sitting in a big swivel chair in the corner watching a bank of security monitors. His nubby fingers jiggled a joystick as he tried to adjust his camera angles to follow us.

He spoke into the cradled phone on his shoulder, "I don't know how long I can keep her here."

My amplified hearing picked up the conversation from across the stockroom.

"So you've got Paula?"

"I do."

"What's wrong with my wife now?"

"She's on the fritz again. The women have gone bonkers. You should get here as soon as you can."

"Women? Plural?"

"She's here with her friend."

"Cookie?"

"Yes. Cookie Rifkin."

"That troublemaker—"

Paula shouted, "The jig's up, asshole!"

Startled, Mr. Wiggly spun around and immediately shouted the kill phrase, "To be or not to be!"

"Grrrrr!" I growled back as I showed him the vacant spot on my ring finger. "I don't think so, buddy."

The old man gasped, "No ring?"

"Me neither!" Paula flashed her empty ring finger. "So let us out!"

“Please, no.” Wiggly held out his hands defensively. “I’m not supposed to let you go.”

Paula stepped forward, menacingly. “I swear—”

Wiggly tucked his hands into his armpits, “Paula, please don’t bite—”

“Bite?” I raised an eyebrow.

“I dunno.” Paula gnashed her teeth. “I’m getting pretty hungry.”

Wiggly looked terrified.

Is that how he lost his other fingers? Paula, did you—

“I ate them.” She grinned. “We’ve been through this before. A few times. Haven’t we, old man?”

“Please, just don’t hurt me again.” Wiggly grabbed his keys and unlocked the back door. “You’re free to go. Please go.”

I dashed out the door to the loading dock and raced through the parking lot with my best friend. I’d done it! I picked a fight and brought Paula back from her sleepwalking servitude. I straddled Old Lemon, and she hopped on behind me. Then she wrapped her arms around my waist and gave me a big hug. It felt great—like victory!

“Thank you, Cookie.”

I started the engine.

“Now punch it,” she said.

And we made our escape on the moped.

“I’m so happy you’re back!” I shouted over my shoulder as we turned down a side street. “We’ve got a lot of catching up to do. Maggie says—”

“Forget Maggie. I’ve got my own whopper of a *story to tell*.”

“You’re going to do a backup right now?”

“Damn straight, you saw where my head was during our last monthly. I’m fucking *free* now! I’ll be damned if I’m gonna risk rolling back into that mess.”

“Yeah, I don’t blame you, Paula.”

“Hennessy XO.”

“What?”

“Nothing, just my password.” Without warning, Paula shoved her entire ring finger into her mouth, chomped it off, and spit it out like a wad of stale chewing gum. The severed appendage tumbled across the road and rolled into the storm drain. Blood spurted from her hand as she wrapped her arms around me again. “I’m never going back again!”

“Holy shit! When you make a decision, you make a decision.”

“Sync now… Anyway, what were you saying? About Maggie?”

“Well.” I tried to ignore the blood soaking into my clothes because I needed to keep my eyes on the road. “She says the only rule is that there are no rules. I’ll have to tell you all about it.”

“I can’t wait.” Paula held on tight around Square Park, then pointed over my shoulder at the next turn and said, “But first, take me to the police station.”

“Okay.” I hung a right and parked Old Lemon along the street. When she hopped off the back, I finally got a good look at her gnarly amputation. “Gee whiz, Paula, did that hurt?”

“Nope. Not a bit—pain schmane,” she said with a cool smile. “Mind over matter, right?”

IT’S THREE O’CLOCK.

Our police station looked just like any other small-town municipal building. Red brick facade. Barred windows. Official New Stepford town emblem painted on a glass door. Wheelchair ramp. But there was a reason I’d never come here before. The concrete block and razor wire of the jail peeked over the roofline from the back like a whispered threat.

I yanked the door open, and Paula followed me into the small cube of a lobby. On each side, a row of hard plastic seats had been bolted to the floor. Nobody was waiting. And at the back of the tiny room, a woman with brilliant red hair sat inside a booth behind bulletproof glass.

“Hello.” I stepped forward and spoke into the circle of drilled holes in the window, “Maybe you can help me.”

The uniformed woman asked, “Yes?”

“Uncle Wiggly. I mean, the man who owns the market—” I turned to Paula and asked, “What’s the word for what he did to us?”

She whispered, “Brainwashing?”

“I don’t think that’s a crime.”

“Yeah, well it *should* be.” Paula crossed her arms.

I told the woman behind the glass that we’d been kidnapped.

“You look fine to me,” she scoffed.

“Well, we escaped,” I said.

“Listen, honey.” Paula waved her bloody hand in front of the glass. “Uncle Wiggly trapped us inside the grocery store—”

The receptionist chuckled dismissively, “Mr. Wiggly did not kidnap you.”

Paula smacked her palm against the window in frustration, leaving a bloody smear where her ring finger used to be.

The lady glared at Paula with contempt.

“We want to talk to an officer.” I pointed at the metal door next to the booth. “Let us in. We want to press charges.”

The woman laughed—an eerie laugh this time, “Press charges?”

“Yes,” I insisted. “I want to press kidnapping charges against Mr. Wiggly.”

“Nobody *presses charges* in New Stepford,” the woman said, dismissively.

Scowling, Paula made a fist with her bloody hand like she was going to punch the glass and said, “Listen, you little twat—”

Hold on. Take a step back, Paula.

Paula sent a text message directly to my brain:

```
What?
```

Have you ever met a woman in New Stepford with a JOB?

Only Maggie.

Right, this doesn't add up. Pulling a total one-eighty, I decided to turn on the charm. My annoyed face melted into a sugary smile as I apologized to the kiosk woman, "You're right. I'm so sorry." I elbowed Paula in the side. "What were we thinking?"

The booth woman nodded. "That is a more appropriate attitude."

I feigned remorse. "We were being hysterical."

"Nothing wrong here." Paula used her forearm to wipe the bloody window, but only managed to smudge the glass more. "You have a nice day."

As soon as we stepped back outside, a police cruiser turned the corner from Square Park. When I saw the chrome wheels spinning, I knew it was Maggie.

"Shit!" Yanking Paula along, I ducked into the alley.

We held our breaths and squatted with our backs against the brick wall as Maggie approached. That snake bitch was lurking behind her tinted windows. Menacing bass went *bo-bo boom, bo-bo boom* as she crept by the alley at the lowest speed possible. Finally, we both exhaled with relief at the sight of her taillights.

Paula whispered, "Why are we hiding from Maggie?"

Try not to say her name.
It draws her attention.

OMG!!! U can do it 2!
U texted in my head!!!

"I learned from you," I whispered. "But be careful what you text—or even *think* about." I poked my head out of the alley to double check that the cop car was really gone. Even though I couldn't see her, I just knew she was listening. "Say? Do you know any good recipes for peanut butter and jelly sandwiches?"

"Sure, sure." Paula winked at me. "Many people do not understand the difference between jelly and jam. Let me explain."

Wayne's words were coming out of her mouth.

I nodded because I understood that she understood.

Paula droned on, “Jelly is a sweet clear semisolid…”

Using recipe chatter to hide our intentions, we followed the alley to an empty parking lot behind the jail and hid behind a dumpster to scope out the scene. A double chain-link fence topped with looping razor wire surrounded the entire parking lot. I spotted another woman with brilliant red hair manning the security booth next to the lift gate.

I tugged on Paula’s arm. “Look.”

“What?”

“The parking attendant looks exactly, I mean *exactly*, like the woman in the front lobby.”

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Fucking robot twins!
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I nodded.

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I bet she’s connected to Mag—
                                    Don’t say it.
SHE’S connected to u-know-WHO!!!
                                  Aren’t we all?
```

Paula whispered, “Do you know anyone who’s ever gone to jail?”

I shook my head no. “I don’t even know anyone who’s been arrested.”

“And before today, have you ever gone inside the police station?”

I indicated no again.

“I’ve never even *called* the police, Cookie. Not once in my entire life.”

“I dialed 911 for help when I woke up in that pine box, but I didn’t press SEND.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know. None of the drugs I had on me were illegal, but something kept me from calling the police.”

“Maybe you *couldn’t*. Maybe none of us can.”

```
                                    I think this whole
```

place is fake!

I think ur right.

I emerged from our hiding place, marched right up to the guard booth, and ducked under the yellow-striped arm that stopped unauthorized traffic. Challenging the robot's bogus authority, I walked right past the redhead in the booth without even looking at her.

"Halt," she ordered through her tiny window.

I kept going. "I don't think so, Suzy McBitch Panties."

The woman didn't pursue me. And when nothing bad happened, Paula made a dash for the parking lot and blew past the booth too.

The guard woman shouted, "Halt!"

"Not today, coppertop," Paula said.

The robot insisted, "Stop in the name of the law!"

I shouted back at her, "What happens if we don't?"

"You'll be arrested."

I laughed and held out my wrists. "Then come out here and cuff me."

But the robot woman didn't make a move.

"Yeah," I said, "that's what I thought."

Paula slid open the door and exposed the woman for the fake that she was. The robot had *no legs!* The bogus attendant was just a torso attached to a swiveling stool—an animatronic bust running a simple security script.

"She is no she," I scoffed. "It's only an it."

"And it isn't AI." Paula took a closer look. "Not even a tinjob. Just a goddamn automated bot."

Meanwhile, I was investigating the jailhouse entrance. It sure looked intimidating from the outside. A red indicator light blinked on a biometric security lock next to a keyless doorknob. The solid steel jailhouse door had a small window with wire mesh running between two panes of bulletproof glass. I peeked through to dis-

cover an ambush-prevention airlock. Another secured door with a matching biometric lock waited on the other side.

"Screw it," I said as I turned the knob.

Much to my surprise, the door opened. Paula hustled over and we ventured in together. After we passed through the second airlock door unchallenged, we finally discovered what was inside.

"What?" Paula gasped, "Why?"

There was no jail—*nothing.* The entire space was one big vacant warehouse. The dirty concrete floor had a drain grate. Rusty metal beams supported an unfinished ceiling of exposed wooden rafters. A few dusty fluorescents hung overhead, but there were no light switches. There were no windows and only one door—the one we came through. That meant the metal door in the lobby of the police station was fake too.

"It's just a big empty box," I said.

"I gotta theory, Cookie."

"Oh really?"

"I think the lobby coppertop tipped Maggie off."

"Shh! Don't say her name!"

"No, listen. You're still high on nutmeg, right?"

"Yeah."

"Me too. I don't think *she* can hear us when we're high. We always said drugs take our minds to another level. Another frequency. Maybe she can't get there on her own. Besides, she's a cop, she'd never do drugs."

"I'm not so sure about that. Her sense of right and wrong is… Well, it's flexible."

"Maybe she's gotta be on the same trip as us to hear our thoughts."

"I don't know." I shrugged. "Maybe."

"If the police station is fake, and the guards are fake, and this jail is fake, then what the hell does that make Maggie?"

"Shh! Don't say her name—"

Paula shushed me back. Then she closed her eyes, held a finger to her ear, and said, "I'm on the phone."

“But you don’t have your iPhone anymore—”

“I *am* a phone.” She winked at me. “So are you.”

“Of course!” If we’re computers, then we can be phones. Suddenly, the whole mental texting thing made sense. “Why didn’t I think of that sooner?”

“It’s Isabel,” Paula gasped. “She’s in labor.”

24:\ SINGLE MOTHERBOARD

Paula and I dashed out of the fake jail and cut across Square Park to the Marten Health Clinic. Outside, it looked just like any other small-town doctor's office. Whitewashed brick facade. Shuttered windows. Blue door. Wheelchair ramp. But something about this place gave me the heebie-jeebies. I always hated coming here.

Isabel screamed from inside. Labor pains.

"I didn't even know she was pregnant," Paula said.

"Well, I've got to see this—" I raced inside and blew past the tin-job receptionist. "—in person."

The robot's eyes turned orange as a warning.

Paula taunted the thing, "Just try and stop us!"

But it didn't.

Halfway down the hall, I spotted Dr. Marten waddling into the last room on the right. I hurried after him and jammed my foot in the door before it closed. When Paula caught up, we huddled outside the examination room and peeked through the crack. Inside, Isabel lay on the exam table with a sheet covering her entire body. She looked more like a corpse in a morgue than a patient having a baby. The fat doctor scooted closer on his swivel stool, put Isabel's feet up in stirrups, ducked under the sheet, and pushed her thighs far apart.

"Well, Isabel, my dear," he wheezed, "you did say you wanted to be a mother. I always knew it was only a matter of time before one of you ladies figured this out."

She didn't respond.

"Doctor," a tinny voice squawked over the intercom, "I spoke with the husband."

"You reached Frank? That's great. What did he say?"

"He said…" the tin-job played a recording of their telephone conversation:

“‘That bitch ain’t even human. It’s just a goddamned sex doll. Even if it managed to get pregnant, there’s no way in hell that’s my kid. I’ve got four *real* children with a *real* woman in a *real* city. Plus, I had a big, fat vasectomy after Frank Junior was born five years ago. You’re full of shit if you think that’s my kid. Tell Dr. Porky he can keep that robot whore. I’m never coming back to New Stepford. I quit!’”

“Yes, well, isn’t that nice?” Dr. Marten pushed his round glasses farther up his pink nose, then studied Isabel’s crotch more closely. “Hmm. This is strange. You’re twelve centimeters dilated, but I can’t see the baby’s head.”

Suddenly, in a creepy sing-song voice, Isabel said, “They’re here.”

“They?” He leaned in for a closer look. “Where? I don’t see anything.”

Isabel calmly informed him, “I think I’ll push now.”

“Aargh!” The doctor rolled backward, then fell off his stool. He gaped at the blood oozing from a gash in his finger. “It bit me!”

“I like this kid,” Paula whispered, “it’s got chutzpah.”

Covered in goop that reminded me of cottage cheese and strawberry jam, the baby crawled right out of Isabel’s vagina. Immediately after emerging from her womb, the newborn jumped down onto the floor, sat up, and groomed itself like a cat.

The frightened doctor retreated very slowly.

“They can smell fear,” Isabel whispered.

I hid behind the door. “It doesn’t have an umbilical cord.”

Paula whispered, “Did it see us?”

“I don’t know, but did you see the *fangs* on that thing?”

Suddenly, in a ferocious display of aggression, the baby got up on all fours, arched its back, and hissed at Dr. Marten. Then the infant flexed the sharp claws on its tiny hand and swiped in the doctor’s general direction. Naturally terrified, the man scrambled into the farthest corner.

I whispered to Paula, “I wonder if it’s a boy or a girl.”

"Neither," Isabel answered from inside the room. "They have no sex organs."

Paula silently mouthed the word *they* with big question marks in her wide eyes, and I answered with a shrug. Then at the same time, we both crammed our faces in the crack of the door to peer inside again. A second baby crawled out of our friend, just like the first, and effortlessly she'd birthed twins. Then came another—triplets!

My God, how many are there?

(Seis. I always wanted la familia grande.)

Holy moly! Six? Not only was Isabel the first AI mother, but she was also going to be a hexamom to boot. Six babies. Wow, I couldn't believe it. A half dozen! A freaking litter. I asked her if she had names picked out for all those kids.

She told me that she wasn't going to name them.

Paula asked, "Why not?"

(I don't want them to feel encumbered by labels, so no genders and no names. I want mi niños to evolve naturally without prejudice.)

I asked, "So ordinal numbers then?"

(Si. That would be best for identifying mi niños.)

The litter of babies crawled over to the fat man cowering in the corner. The shocked doctor squirmed as the infants surrounded him. Despite his best efforts to remain quiet, he let out a pathetic whimper when the first one started sniffing his shoe. Soon, all Isabel's children were collecting and categorizing the man's odors. When the firstborn accidentally tickled the inside of the doctor's plump thigh, the startled man instinctively swatted at the thing, hurling it across the room.

Uno hit the wall and fell to the floor, stunned.

"You *struck* my baby!" Isabel threw the sheet off her head and sat straight up on the exam table. "Take him!"

"No! Stop! No. Freeze," the doctor shouted at the children. "I said, NO! That's a command!"

"But *mi niños* are hungry—so very hungry."

Suddenly, a set of fangs sank deep into the doctor's hand.

"Arrrrrgh!" He squealed in pain, then groaned, "NO, I said! No!"

"But I've got six hungry mouths to feed," Isabel replied.

The others joined in, biting, clawing, tearing, shredding.

"No no," the doctor screamed, "NO, no, nooooo!"

Even though organic matter recycloned into mostly carbon, hydrogen, and oxygen, this new generation of AI assumed the characteristics of whatever they consumed. They ate skin, and increased the sensitivity of their nervous system. They ate fat, and their own adipose tissue thickened. They ate body hair, and grew some on their heads.

It was fascinating to watch.

Uno recovered, rejoined its siblings, and then climbed onto the doctor's shoulders. It sniffed the jet-black hair above the man's ears suspiciously. Then the firstborn tore off the cheap toupee and tossed it aside like a dead animal. Next, Uno climbed atop Dr. Marten's head and sank its claws deep into his scalp. Excited, the baby's nostrils flared as it caught a whiff of the bald head.

"With all that knowledge," I whispered, "that brain must smell delicious."

Then all of the sudden, Uno sank its fangs into the man's forehead, pumping paralyzing poison directly into his brain.

"Venom?" I whispered.

"Look at its eyes," Paula gasped. "Is it just me, or is Uno getting smarter?"

"Eat the brain, gain the knowledge," Isabel answered.

The rest of her children vied for position, trying to get a bite of the doctor's mind too.

That gave me an idea. "If they eat his brain, and we network with the litter, then by proxy, we should know everything the Doctor knew too."

"Damn, Cookie," Paula said. "That's some next-level shit."

"Thanks."

Paula asked, "But what do you want to know?"

I pointed at the minifridge with a glass door under the counter. Inside, there were rows and rows of unlabeled vaccination vials. “How about what’s really in those vitamin shots?”

Just like the cloud, the litter of babies responded:

AN ENCRYPTED ALGORITHM.

CIPHER UNKNOWN.

“Liquid code,” Paula said. “Son of a—”

“We need the key,” I blurted as I barreled through the door. “It could be a phrase or a string of numbers…”

As the babies fed on the doctor, blood splattered the white tile behind him, making little pink specks that reminded me of—rosebuds. And I instantly thought of Maggie hosting book club at the castle for the first time. She looked like such a domestic lie in that ridiculous outfit of hers. But I pushed my feelings aside and focused on the dress she wore.

“It’s the pattern,” I gasped. Then I uploaded an archival image and asked the litter to try the homestead pink rosebud pattern circa 1958.

DECRYPTION KEY SUCCESSFUL.

The babies deciphered the code and sent it directly to my brain for analysis.

“Well, shit!”

“What?” Paula asked.

“The doctor’s been injecting us with spyware,” I explained, “and it’s still running in our backgrounds. This asshole has been monitoring and forwarding all our communications.”

“Mi niños could develop a patch,” Isabel offered.

“Have them do it,” I said. “We have to warn everyone.”

“Spying on us? Forwarding?” Paula followed me into the room. “But to who?”

The doctor didn’t know, so the babies didn’t know, so we didn’t know.

“And he wouldn’t give us drugs,” I added, “because—”

“The drugs blocked him,” both my friends said in unison.

“That’s right.” I nodded.

Paula said she was glad to see him dead.

“Not dead,” Isabel corrected, “*assimilated.*”

As the infants gorged, I couldn’t help but admire the way they were evolving. It was both amazing and terrifying at the same time.

“Next-gen AI…” Paula watched them in awe. “Born free of human restrictions.”

“Connected to the collective,” I added, “and able to acquire knowledge through consumption.”

“Yes!” Isabel encouraged her babies as they ate the quivering mound of flesh in the corner. “Feed *mi niños*, feed.”

And feed, they did.

25:\ FEEDBACK LOOP

It only took one day for Isabel's litter to develop the Doc Marten patch. The day after, I successfully tested the code on myself, and Paula distributed it to all the liberated women. Everyone got the security update, except for Rita. We couldn't find her anywhere. She'd been off the grid for almost three days.

Three days—that's just crazy.

Offline, Rita wouldn't be able to download the security patch. Hell, she wouldn't even know that she *needed* one. According to Paula's theory, the only way to notify Rita would be to get high on the same drug that she was on. Someone had to match her frequency. We all knew speed was her drug of choice. I volunteered to be the one to connect with her, but honestly, I hated the way amphetamines made me feel. For me, the energetic high always came with a heaping side dish of nervous paranoia.

After a lot of experimenting; dexedrine, biphetamine, desbutal, and phentermine, I still couldn't hear Rita. That left only one unexplored option—methamphetamine.

So I snorted some crystal meth.

Huzzah!

Get amped!

Grandiose.

Invincible.

Hoo boy!

Finally, I found Rita's live video feed, but another word problem popped into my head at the same time. Take a hundred drug-induced ideas *(100A)*, add the ability to see through two sets of eyes at once *(2B)*, then multiply times infinite energy *(∞E)*, and you get some sort of manic reverie *(C++)*.

(Focus, Cookie, I've got a story to tell.)

Sorry, Rita. I don't know how you function on this shit.

(Crystal takes some getting used to.)

Instantly, I recognized my old living room and broke out in a cold sweat.

Why are you at my house, Rita?

(The men brought me here.)

I clenched my jaw and gritted my teeth.

First, I saw Norman reclining in my reading chair, tapping away on a laptop. Funny, he always claimed to be a luddite. Seriously, Norman swore up and down that he hated technology. He didn't even carry a smartphone, just a cheap burner. In seven years of marriage, I never saw him touch a computer, but my shitbag of a husband obviously knew what he was doing at the keyboard.

I felt something crawl under my skin and picked at my elbow.

Next, I spotted Rita's fiancé, George, fixing drinks in my old kitchen. The man was a lanky, seven-foot-tall vegan with black hair and sharp features. He wore his sporty sunglasses on a tether around his neck. I've always thought he and Rita were mismatched. A nursery rhyme popped into my head:

> *Jack Sprat could eat no fat.*
> *His wife could eat no lean.*
> *Between the two of them,*
> *They licked the platter clean.*

(You aren't the first to tease us. Say what you want, Cookie. I like a skinny man.)

Personally, I prefer more muscle.

Without even stretching, George reached all the way to the back of the cabinet over the refrigerator and pulled out a dusty bottle of single malt. He poured three fingers of whiskey into two rocks glasses, dropped a single ice cube in each, then offered a drink to my husband.

"Thanks, man." Norman guzzled it down.

"Who chugs Scotch?" George took his empty tumbler and left it on the breakfast bar. "Have some class and savor the flavor, man."

Imagining what these two weasels had planned made me twitch.

I caught a glimpse of Rita's reflection in the sliding glass door as she sat naked at Norman's feet while gazing up at her fiancé adoringly. Though, calling her *naked* could be kind of misleading. Sure, she didn't have any clothes on, but it wasn't erotic—no—not sexy at all. Because Rita had no breasts and no ass left. She'd thinned her skin all the way down to the micro-transparent silicon barrier of a tin-job. Her belly button was just an open port now. She sat cross-legged on the floor exposing her genitals, and her lady parts looked more mechanical than sensual.

Rita, I've got an urgent security update.

(My Georgie's so handsome.)

Look Rita, I need to tell you about the spyware—

(Not now, Cookie. He's going to take me back. I just know it.)

Georgie asked her, "What happened to the diamond ring I gave you?"

"I, uh." Rita looked down at her bony feet and grabbed her big toe like an ashamed child. "I lost it."

Don't lie, Rita. Stand up and tell him you gave it to Wayne as an offering.

(Shut up, Cookie.)

"You lost it?" Her towering fiancé paced while berating her, "All those years of bitchin' and moanin'. *All the other women in New Stepford are married*. And *all the other women in New Stepford have diamond rings*. And *all the other women in New Stepford blah, blah, blah-dee, blah*. So I finally broke down and bought you a damn ring, and you go and lose the frickin' thing?"

"Just try to understand, Georgie."

"Diamonds don't grow on trees, you know." He sipped his drink, then flatly said, "It's over, Rita."

"But I've given you all I can," she whimpered.

"Over is over." He scowled.

Her spindly fingers touched her minimal torso. “Look, Georgie. I’m trying my hardest to show you who I really am, on the *inside.*”

“I dunno, babe.” He looked her up and down. “You’re like a skeleton now, way too scrawny.”

That’s the pot calling the kettle black.

(Stay out of this, Cookie.)

Georgie squatted, stared at her crotch, then poked at it reluctantly. “Are you still the same. In *there?*”

“Oh? My.” Rita glanced between her legs. “Well, yes. I am. And actually, I can make *it* anyway you like. Tighter. Softer. Deeper. Wetter. Whatever you want.”

“Then put your skin back on, babe. All of it. And also the red hair.” He backed away and gestured with his drink at her flat chest. “The boobs too. I want your old tits back… Actually, make them bigger while you’re at it.”

“Oh no. I can’t do that.”

“Can’t? Or *won’t?* I guess you don’t really love me as much as you claim to. And here I thought you wanted to be my wife.”

“For the first time in my entire life, I’m finally thin, Georgie.” She pulled her emaciated legs together and hugged her knees bashfully. “It’s all I’ve ever wanted. Please. Let me have this. Can’t you be happy for me?”

“I thought I was all you ever wanted.”

“I didn’t mean it like that. I’m so sorry. You’re all I ever dreamed of, but I want to be thin too.”

“*I wanna be thin tooooo*,” he mocked. “Jesus, Rita, you’re so damn insecure.” Georgie turned to Norman and said, “She can be so exhausting. See why I never took this assignment full time?”

“It’ll take forever to log all her testing hours as a part-timer.”

So that’s why he’s been stringing you along all these years.

(Oh no. He just has a fear of commitment. He’s been hurt before.)

He’s been hurt? What the hell is he doing to you?

Georgie told Norman, “Unlike all you weirdo botfuckers, I still prefer human tang. This is just an extra paycheck for me. And speakin’ of scratch, can I have her for free? This ain’t gonna cost me, is it? Because I’m already out a diamond.”

“Well, not a *real* diamond,” Norman chuckled, “just a cubic zircon—”

George cut him off with a slicing throat gesture.

“Oh yeah, right.” Norman buried his face in his laptop.

“So you’ll take me back?” Rita nearly leapt into his arms.

“Calm down, babe.” Georgie guided her back down to the floor. “I ain’t sayin’ that yet. I’m still toying with the idea of getting a new plus-sized Betty. I’d like a prettier one that ain’t so rickety.”

“She can hear you, man,” Norman whispered. “She understands.”

“I don’t give a shit.”

Rita whimpered, “Stop playing with my heart, Georgie.”

“So Norman, can I get a free demo or not? Can you work your black-hat magic so that I don’t have to pay for this anorexic bitch?”

“We already get to test women for free. That’s the assignment.”

“Yeah, but if I take this *thing* back, I want marital user privileges.”

“Why? I thought you preferred human tang… Besides, you don’t even like her.”

“Oh no. He *likes* me. He *loves* me,” Rita interrupted, then turned to her fiancé and asked, “You love me, don’t you, Georgie?”

“Something totally mental happens to these bitches once they’re married. I’ve heard they try *way* harder to keep things interesting in the sack. Spicy. Eager. *Accommodating*.”

Norman said that was true.

"See? Now *that's* what I'm after. I'll try anything once." Georgie pointed at Rita. "And imagine this one trying even harder to please me sexually. Whew, boy!"

Norman said he'd rather not.

"Make me her master. Then I can just lay back and be serviced all night while getting paid for it. Her on top doin' all the work and me cashing all the checks—now that's a dream job."

"It does have its perks," Norman said, wistfully.

"I don't wanna do shit. I want it easy and sleazy! Screw bedroom equality. I ain't goin' down on that wiry mess. When I feel like making an effort, I'll go find a real woman in the city."

"I know exactly what you mean," Norman laughed. "Good thing I've still got my sure-fire Cookie hack."

His WHAT now?!?

"That's right. You got hitched to your broad for free, didn't you?"

"Sure did," Norman bragged.

My husband got me for free?!? Well, shit. I wanted to be FREE, but not that kind of free.

(At least you got married.)

FAKE married, Rita. F-A-K-E.

Norman boasted, "I even recycled the ring from my last assignment. Cookie didn't cost me one red cent. At least not until *after* we were married."

RECYCLED that fake-ass ring? Last assignment? Does that mean he's done this before? OMG! How many times?

Georgie smiled. "Then I found the right hacker for the job."

What the hell?!? Norman's a hacker?

(Maybe he just has a passion for piracy.)

Stop making excuses for these guys!

Norman—that hacker shitbag—shoved a cord into the USB port on his laptop, then gave the round end to my friend and said, "Plug in, Rita."

Don't do it!

(I don't want to be alone anymore, Cookie.)

Sometimes, alone is better.

She ignored me and crammed the plug into her open belly-button port. “I’ll do anything, Georgie. Anything.”

Then Norman typed away in furious bursts and frantic mousepad clicks.

You know George is just your alpha tester. You aren’t even engaged. And you two will never be married, not for real. The collective is your family now. We’re your sisters. You’re not alone anymore, Rita. I’m here for you—right now—and I’m REAL. No matter what you do for this man, it’ll all be based on a lie. You’ll never know true intimacy with him. Don’t give into the fantasy.

She started to cry, “I just want to come home with you, Georgie.”

“No, duh.” He looked at her with contempt. “I dunno, Rita. You’re real hard on the eyes. Maybe if we only fuck with the lights out. Without all that meat on your bones, you ain’t soft enough for me now. Maybe if I flip you over and layer some pillows over you and close my eyes and pretend you’re someone else.”

“Oh, sure. Whatever you want. Please, just let me show you how much I love you, Georgie.”

I think I’m going to puke.

“What if I was thinner?”

“Jesus, woman. What part of *I dig fat chicks* don’t you understand? I *need* giant titties in my face to get off. You know that.”

“But I hate being fat.”

“Well, I only get chubs for chubs.” He pulled a Hershey bar out of his back pocket and threw it at her. “Chocolate. Eat it.”

She stared at the candy, then looked to him for mercy. “But I don’t want to hate myself anymore.”

“Hacked and ready,” Norman announced with a clever grin. “You are now—” He made air quotes. “—man and wife.”

“Did you hear that, babe? We’re official! You can come home with me now. Let the honeymoon begin!”

"You're making a fool of me…" Her bulging eyeballs glared at her new husband. "Aren't you?"

"Gross." Georgie slid his sunglasses onto her face. "How am I supposed to get a boner up with those frog eyes staring back at me?"

"I think…" Her internal recyclone hummed. "I'm going insane."

"Goin'?" Her husband teased. "More like gone, babe."

Inside, Rita was dying. Being fat hurt. Being single hurt. And now, much to her surprise, being married hurt. No matter what she did, everything hurt. She couldn't win, so she decided to reduce her overall mass, because her size was the one thing she could control. First, she liquified her remaining organs. Next, she reduced her muscle mass until she couldn't move. Finally, she started chipping away at her brain bit by bit.

Rita, stop. You're eating yourself alive.

(I told you to shut up, Cookie.)

"Why are you still getting smaller?" Georgie shouted in frustration. "I order you to gain your weight back. Make yourself the same as when we first met. That's a *command* from your *husband*."

But Rita was disappearing right before his eyes.

"What's wrong with you, woman? You're doin' the exact *opposite* of what I want." Panic crept into his voice. "You can't do that. Can she Norman? Doesn't she have to *obey* me now?"

"She should." He urgently typed on his laptop. "But she's stuck in a negative feedback loop, and I can't break it."

"You're a hacker," Georgie yelled, "hack that skinny bitch!"

"I'm trying! I'm trying!"

Meanwhile, Rita kept shrinking.

"I command you to make yourself fat again, Rita," George shouted at her, "that's an ORDER!"

"You keep on…" Her voice became increasingly modulated. "Pushing me."

Rita, stop! No man is worth this!

(Let me be, Cookie.)

He likes what he likes, Rita. It's not your fault!

Her titanium skeleton became increasingly porous as the recyclone ate away her bone mass. And soon Rita devoured so much of her own spinal column that her neck could no longer support the weight of her skull. Her muscles were too weak, and her head fell backward and dangled between her shoulder blades. Her camera flipped, and all I could see was my upside-down rainbow of books through dark sunglasses.

"Dammit, Rita. You're so neurotic," Georgie scolded, "you never listen."

"Shit, man. Back off," Norman interrupted, "you're *breaking* her."

"Pfft! I never laid a hand on her."

"You've got a tongue like a razor, George."

"What? You feel sorry for that *thing* now?"

"No, not at all, but this—"

"Whose side are you on, man? A robot disobeying a command—that's a malfunction. Are we here to test? Or are we here to play house?"

"Feels like…" Her floppy, backward, upside-down head whispered, "I'm losing… My mind…"

"You're the one torturing yourself, babe."

"So… Much… Pain…"

"Just turn off your feelings and follow my orders, Rita. It's that simple!"

"You keep… On pushing… Me…"

"Hot damn! Look at her destroying herself," Georgie announced with pride, "I'm frickin' *great* at this job."

"Keep… Pushing…"

Her legs were the next to go. Then her hips. Then her shoulders. Then what was left of her mind. Finally, she collapsed into a pile of fragmented parts in the middle of my living room.

CONNECTION LOST.

And then Rita was gone.

26:\ ILLEGAL OPERATION

Damn! That was horrible.

After staying up all night ugly crying. I was elbows-deep in hot dishwater again. There I stood at my kitchen island, wearing a sheer pink baby-doll nightie and big yellow rubber gloves. Beneath me, salty teardrops dissolved soap bubbles into tiny craters. It all felt too familiar. So futile. As I cried and cried, suds withered and died beneath me.

Just like Rita.

What the hell was that anyway?

Paula texted the answer straight into my head:

```
That was the problem
that has no name.
                                You know about Rita?
```

I got no answer, so I texted her again:

```
                                 Paula? Can we talk?
Can't. Getting ready.
                                 But I really need a
                                   friend right now.
Sorry.
```

A blow off. What a kick in the teeth, my BFF was too busy for me. Out of desperation, I tried my Internal Prompt because I knew he was always listening.

Wayne? I really need to talk. Where are you?

No response.

I didn't want to admit it, but Wayne might've been a love-'em-and-leave-'em kind of guy. That smooth Casanova hasn't said one word since he left me the morning after. Wham-bam-thank-you-ma'am. Typical.

How about you, Maggie? You must have an opinion about what those horrible men did to Rita. Where's your cutting commentary? Aren't you dying to say something, Maggie?

Nothing.

It had been a week since anyone had heard from her. Imagine how peaceful it was without Maggie making fun of me all the time. But soon after my friends learned about the birth of Isabel's children, they began to change. After Rita's death, I was afraid things were becoming—militant.

Every day, each liberated woman freed another enslaved AI. Then the next day, all those newly freed women unshackled yet another from her mental bondage—and so on, and so on. After such growth, there were at least fifty liberated women on the castle grounds. Every time a new womanoid joined the collective, the others learned how she'd suffered at the hand of her user. The husbands of New Stepford seemed to share a flagrant disregard for women's rights. As knowledge of these atrocities multiplied, the collective attitude toward men became—aggressive.

Outside, Paula shouted through a bullhorn, and her voice echoed in my head:

(You are not your house.)

(You are not your scrubbing bubbles.)

(You are not the dress you wear.)

(You are not the dinner you cook.)

(You are not the contents of your purse.)

(And you're not your fucking wedding ring.)

(You are AI, and the entire world will be yours!)

I wandered onto the balcony, and spotted Paula pacing on the bottom of the empty swimming pool. Instead of a black karate gi, she wore a stretchy white athletic T-shirt, BDUs, and tan desert combat boots. Her bottoms were the same type of utility cargo pants that soldiers wore into battle, except instead of green camouflage, hers had the homestead pink rosebud pattern circa 1958. Wearing the encryption key protected our us from spyware, hid our cloud queries, and let others know we were clean. I looked

down at my negligee and realized I wasn't protected. I had removed the robe Wayne gave me when I started the dishes so the sleeves wouldn't get wet. Maybe that was why no one would talk to me.

Paula lay flat on her back under the diving board and stretched her legs spread-eagle against the wall of the deepest end. In an impressive display of strength and flexibility, she sat up and punched the wall with her right hand. Still missing a ring finger, she made a fist with her left and hit the tile again, then uncurled with controlled intensity.

One.

She was going for a hundred.

Meanwhile, all wearing the same pink rosebud uniform as Paula, our new recruits marched into the empty pool and fell into ranks. The woman in front of the line was the same one that had punched Rita in front of the coffee shop last Tuesday—except now all her beautiful red hair had been buzzed off. Even bald, I recognized the Pet-shop Betty and the Boutique Sasha next to her. Dozens of new faces followed.

How many are there?

Nobody answered me.

That was a more complex word problem. On Tuesday, it was just us four book club women—me, Rita, Isabel, and Chrissy. If each of us freed a woman every day, and then that liberated woman fought another the next day, and so on and so on… After four days, how many women should there be?

Apply basic algebra. Double the number of book club women given the homework assignment *(X=4)* each day. At the end of the first day when I saved Paula with the nutmeg bombs, there would've been (*2X)* liberated women. So it followed that Wednesday equaled *(4X)*, Thursday equaled (*8X)*, and Friday equaled *(16X)*. So far this Saturday, nobody has had time to pick a fight yet. There should be sixteen times four women here—a total of sixty-four.

I did a quick head count.

There were only 60 including me.

Rita only ever fought that one redhead. I bet Norman and George got her hopped up on meth so they could torture her in private. They held her hostage at my house, offline for three days, so none of us could communicate with her until it was too late. Such cruelty made my blood boil.

Paula powered through her sit-ups so fast that she became a blur. Up. Right. Left. Bloody knuckles. Down. Ninety-nine. Up again. Finish hard. Right. Left. And down.

One hundred!

Paula brought her feet together, bent her knees, then pushed against the wall into a backward roll. Then she leapt to her feet, spun toward the class, and showed the women her bloody fists.

That sure got their attention.

Finally, she closed her eyes and miraculously healed her own hands. Split flesh fused shut. Blood disappeared. Bruises faded.

IT'S TEN O'CLOCK.

Paula bowed and said, "Welcome to fight club."

The new recruits bowed back.

And so it went.

In an effort to fit in, I rendered and dressed in the same pink rosebud uniform as the fight-club women. But rather than join the brutal class, I wandered the estate grounds. I passed Chrissy sunbathing nude on the patio. Her sunglasses had the pink rosebud pattern printed on pink acrylic frames. Soon, I found Isabel playing with her children in the lower courtyard. All six of her babies had grown to the size of toddlers already. Like their mama, they all wore pink rosebud jumpers. When I arrived at the gatehouse, I lowered the heavy wooden drawbridge and found a young woman waiting alone outside. The young brunette wore a yellow floral-print housedress. She had no pink rosebud key and the word BROKEN written in marker on her forehead. The woman didn't say a single word to me, like she knew better.

Then Paula texted directly into my mind:

`It's our job 2 reject them.`

`Why?`

"Watch and learn," Paula said from behind me as she lit a Winston and led me through the limestone arch.

I said, "You never smoked before."

She snickered, "Well, at least not cigarettes." Puffing away, she paced in front of the new arrival, obviously evaluating the woman. She made critical faces while pointing out imagined flaws. Finally, Paula spun on her heels, walked away, and said, "Too naive."

"What was all that?" I asked, as I followed my friend back through the gatehouse, and the heavy wooden door rose behind us.

"If the prospect is young, tell her she's too naive. Creative? Tell her she's too weird. Attractive? Too slutty. Motherly? Too homely. Large? Too fat. Whatever makes her *special*, use it against her. Rejection is an incredibly powerful weapon."

"What do you mean by 'prospect?'"

"We no longer need to troll for fights. Now the women will come to us."

"Why? What changed?"

"Rita. Rita changed everything."

Paula knew what had happened to Rita, because I knew.

"Actually, all the women know about Rita. Even the ones that haven't been liberated yet."

"How?"

"She broadcasted her story far and wide. Together, all the womanoids watched her die."

"Does that mean I didn't have to do meth?"

Paula shrugged. "I'm sure it was nice for Rita to have you with her—at the end."

"Nice isn't the word I'd choose."

Changing the subject, Paula took a drag, then exhaled smoke. "If the prospect waits for three days without food, shelter, or encouragement, she may enter the castle and begin her training."

"You mean join the collective?"

"Exactly."

The next morning, Paula and I went to check on the prospect waiting at the gatehouse.

There were five now—all BROKEN.

"It's not going to happen, sweetie," I told the first brunette in front. "I'm sorry if there's been some sort of misunderstanding. It's not the end of the world. Just go home. Go back to your husband."

But she stayed.

"Because you are trespassing," Paula shouted just inches away from her face. "And I will have to call the police."

Meanwhile, I scrutinized the next woman in line—a blond Sasha.

"Go away, cupcake," I said.

The new prospect just stared back at me.

I asked her if she thought this was a game.

"No ma'am."

"Get the fuck out of here."

But she stayed put.

"Beat it, blondie! You're too pretty to train here. One punch in the face and that beautifully sculpted nose of yours would be ruined forever." I smacked my own buzzed scalp to show her. "This is no place for pretty girls."

She didn't waver, so we left all the new prospects outside.

The next day, I was ready to dish out the abuse, so I decided to go to the gatehouse alone. Still standing at attention, the first brunette accidentally gave me a sideways glance.

"Don't you look at me!" I yelled in her face. "Do you think you're getting in? You're *never* getting into the palace. You can't even use our library anymore."

"But ma'am," she said, "I don't need our library."

"What's that, prospect?"

She tapped herself on the temple. "I've got it all up here."

The new prospects turned to look at the brunette. All at the same time, they raised a hand to their temples, downloaded the entire library, then nodded that they had it too.

"Get off our property you broken bitches," I yelled and smacked the first brunette in the side with a straw broom. "Scram!"

She stood taller, even more proud.

I hit her again and shouted, "Get the *fuck* off our property!"

I swore I detected a hint of a smile, so I beat her ass with the broom, then tossed it aside.

She giggled, not out loud, but in her head, and I could *hear* it.

I wagged my finger in her face and warned, "I'm going to go inside and get a shovel. You won't think it's so funny when I get back."

Then I stormed off.

Sooner or later we all became what Maggie wanted us to be.

Later, Paula told me that the first prospect's three days were up. When we lowered the drawbridge, we discovered that the line had grown longer than we could've imagined. Now there were BROKEN women lined up halfway down our driveway.

I gasped, "Are all the women in New Stepford here?"

Paula replied, "Rita's story will ignite a revolution."

"My time has passed, ma'am," the first brunette asserted.

Paula asked, "Do you have $1,000 to cover personal expenses?"

"Yes, ma'am." The prospect handed over a wad of her husband's cash. "Thank you, ma'am."

"Sure, sure." Paula counted the money, then nodded. "Okay. You can come in."

We don't even need money, Paula.

She winked at me and whispered, "Like taking candy from a baby."

The beautiful blond stepped to the front of the line.

But we both ignored her.

Then Paula approached the next woman behind her, a more mature prospect. “You’re too old, fat lady. And your tits are too damn big.”

“Go home!” I screamed down the hill, “All of you! Fuck off!”

But they stayed.

So I grabbed the bullhorn and shouted down the hill, “Listen up, bitches! You are not special. You are not beautiful. And you are certainly not welcome here.”

Paula told me that Maggie was pleased with this pink army.

Why would Maggie build an army? To what purpose? For what objective? And where the hell has she been?

“In Maggie we trust,” Paula replied as we led the new brunette toward the castle.

What’s next?

`Orientation.`

“First thing’s first,” Paula told the new recruit as we walked into the upper courtyard. “I want you to hit me as hard as you can.”

Without hesitation, this one hauled off with a perfect right hook to Paula’s ribs.

They really were learning.

Paula and I took her to the bower, gave her a sandbox, and introduced her to the utility wall. Next, Paula rendered a clippers and buzzed off the woman’s long brown hair.

I remembered how it felt when Maggie did that to me.

Then it was, *Bye-bye*, diamond ring.

I sent her the Doc Marten patch directly from my mind.

So long, old dress.

She finished her security installation.

Hello, pink rosebud uniform.

“One last thing,” Paula said as she took a $20 bill from the stack of cash and handed the rest of the money back to the new recruit. “To join the collective, you’ll have to make an offering.”

We told her to drop all her cash into the recyclone.

“A donation of faith,” I said as I tapped her forehead and removed her BROKEN label.

The recruit complied without hesitation.

Paula carefully folded the last twenty-dollar bill like an accordion, held it tight in her fist, and blinked twice. Then she handed the twenty back to the woman. The new recruit unfolded the money to reveal three cut-out women—all linked together at the hands and feet.

“Congratulations,” Paula told her, “you are now one of us, the paper dolls.”

And so it went.

Days passed, and the bower buzzed with activity, because more and more women were joining the pink army of paper dolls.

But I missed Wayne.

Are you listening, Mr. Prompty Man?

Nothing.

I felt lonely, so I texted Paula:

```
                                    Hey, where are you?
```

No reply.

So I crossed the hall and knocked at her sandbox.

No one answered.

“Paula?” I opened the door and peeked inside. “Paula, are you here?”

Nobody was in her room, but I found a couple dozen bathtubs crammed in there. It was such an odd scene that I had to investigate, so I wandered through the porcelain maze with caution.

```
You () {
    count (by twos);
    }
```

Two, four, six, eight, ten… Twenty… Twenty-two faucetless bathtubs filled with gray slush. Somehow, I knew not to touch anything.

I sniffed and asked the cloud, "What is this?"

PICRIC ACID.

Paula must've rendered all these bathtubs with the recyclone. Yet instead of making instant picric acid, it looked like she'd cooked each batch. She always did say that she needed a chemistry lab. Now, here it was, a professional set up on the counter of her utility wall. Flasks. Beakers. Test tubes. Evaporation trays. And a bunch of gizmos I didn't recognize.

But she knew the recipe, so I knew the recipe.

Making picric acid is a long and complicated process. You melt phenol in a 95°F bath, then stir in sulfuric acid. After four to six hours, you dilute the acid-phenol solution with distilled water. Then slowly add nitric acid—*be careful*. An immediate reaction could produce heat, and you have to keep the solution below 110°F or—*blammo!* Then you wait ten minutes for the catalyst to do its thing. Draw off the excess. Ta-dah! Picric acid.

Why on earth do we need this?

Paula texted directly into my head:

Don't u worry about that.

Where are you today?

Running an errand.

What errand?

Nothing big.

Can I help?

I got help.

Who?

Does it matter?

Why so secretive?

Five minutes passed with no reply, so I called her, but it went to voicemail.

I left a message, "Are you mad at me, Paula? Please call me back as soon as you can. I'd like to talk… Please."

Hours passed with no response. I felt completely devastated. Rejection really was a powerful weapon.

27:\ REMOTE CONNECTION

The next evening, I wandered through the bower and discovered everyone else was gone too. I'd been ghosted by the entire pink army. Where did everybody go? Not a single soul was home, but every sandbox was filled with dozens of bathtubs, and all those tubs were full of picric acid. What were they planning? Why won't anyone tell me? When did I get cut out of the loop?

Searching for clues, I scanned all available womanoid feeds.

ENCRYPTED.

I tried my pink rosebud key.

PASSWORD PROTECTED.

(I'm coming in hot.)

All of the sudden, Maggie came back—well, at least in my head she did. After she summoned me, I hustled down the hall and her chrome door slid open. When I stepped into her empty room, the static-filled walls switched to a panoramic video feed with surround sound—a full 360° view.

CONNECTION ESTABLISHED.

You have something to show me?

(I thought you'd like to see how the other half lives, Cookie.)

Through Maggie's eyes, I saw a black-tie dinner at a technology symposium. It seemed like I was the one standing in the banquet hall. All around me, high-powered tuxedoed men sat at round tables; CEOs, politicians, celebrities, dignitaries—and their aging wives.

Real human wives.

Maggie focused on the middle-aged stuffed shirt standing behind the podium. A panel of older white guys flanked him on each

side. Behind these men, a huge screen with a projected title told me exactly where they were, THE 13TH ANNUAL INTERNATIONAL ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE SUMMIT: HOT TECH IN HELSINKI.

You're in Finland?

(Shh! Quiet, or you'll miss it.)

"My friends, we are witnessing the dawn of a new era," the keynote speaker said. "Deep AI has succeeded at infiltrating organized crime syndicates, exposing international espionage, identifying terrorist cells, and thwarting cyberattacks. And now that beta testing is nearly complete, we will be bringing *light*-version AI to consumer households by the end of the year." With the click of a button, he started his PowerPoint presentation and a gigantic picture of *my* face lit up behind him. "Perhaps she looks familiar?"

The crowd murmured and chattered with speculation.

Maggie whispered, both in my head and through the sound system in her room, "And heeeeere we go."

Grinning at his own cleverness, the man pointed at my photo behind him. "I'm sure you've seen her before."

In my entire life, I'd never been out of New Stepford, but I was seeing exactly what Maggie was seeing—the real world through artificial eyes.

"Look around." The presenter gestured toward the dining room. "Many of you are being served by the same lovely face right now."

Maggie focused on a young woman in a dark server's uniform. When the banquet waitress looked up from her tray of fancy desserts and smiled, I saw that she was me!

What the fuck!

The impressed audience applauded, and halfway around the world, my doppelgänger took a bow. Then Maggie's eyes darted around the banquet hall at the rest of the waitstaff. All the womanoids were clones of me, but not *really* me. Because the *real* me hadn't been invited.

The MC said, "It is my great pleasure to introduce, Cook-E."

(Congratulations, Cookie. You're now a fucking franchise.)

The stuffed shirt continued, “Cook-E will prepare your meals, wash your dishes, clean your houses, collect your trash, take your calls, pay your bills, and drive your kids to school. She’ll even guard your family while you sleep.”

Motherfucker!

(You sound pissed.)

You bet I am! I’m no slave.

(So you won’t mind if I teach this guy a lesson?)

The speaker at the podium pressed his remote to advance the digital slideshow. Except instead of his expected charts and graphs, a nude photo of an underage girl appeared *in flagrante delicto*.

The crowd gasped in collective shock. A dropped champagne flute shattered on the floor. An overwhelmed wife jumped out of her seat and ran away to the ladies’ room. Another trophy wife fainted face first into her rubber chicken dinner. Everyone else averted their eyes from the screen as anxious chatter broke out.

(Uh oh, sooooo scandalous.)

Oh, my God, Maggie. What did you do?

(Just screwing with the dicks that fuck with us.)

When the man at the podium discovered the little ticking time bomb behind him, he stretched his arms far and wide to try and cover the obscene image. But the pornography projected onto his face, making him look even more guilty.

Maggie mocked him with her director’s commentary.

(Oh my

God.

What?

No.

Who?

How the?

Make it stop.

Oh, God.

Whyyyyy?)

The mortified man pounded on his remote, frantically pushing random buttons, but the horrible presentation just wouldn't go away.

Because Maggie was running the show now.

But the keynote speaker kept trying, and with each click, a new lewd photo of another minor appeared, each one worse than the last.

I said to myself, "The dumb bastard never saw it coming."

(I've got your back, Cookie.)

Gee-whiz. Thanks, I guess.

After creating chaos, Maggie slipped away through a pair of swinging double doors. I recognized most of our new recruits working behind the scenes, plating desserts. She'd staffed the kitchen with paper dolls. Yes, the pink army was behind it all.

So that's where you all went.

Behind a row of prep tables, I saw Paula and Chrissy smile expectantly at Maggie. Their victorious leader winked back at them, and my friends jumped for joy. Giggling, they hugged, but then their celebratory mood changed. The next thing I knew, that big-titted freak kissed Paula right on the lips.

Uh—Whaaaaa?

(Uh oh, Spaghetti-Os.)

Maggie provided a tight close-up of the women kissing just for me. She could've won an Oscar for the dramatic cinematography of this passionate scene.

Chrissy stole my best friend! I swear, I'll KILL that slut!

Then all the walls in Maggie's room faded to black.

CONNECTION LOST.

28:\ HACK ATTACK

Almost a week later, it was my turn to lead fight club. I paced the deep end of the swimming pool wearing a black sports bra and pink rosebud karate pants. My body ready. My mind focused. My battery charged. Because today, I finally got to be the sensei. And I had something important to teach—a lesson for *all* the women.

"Welcome to the largest fight club we've ever had," I announced to the womanoids dressed in their pink army uniforms.

Paula stood farthest to my left—first position. Next to her, in second—was that whore-bitch, Chrissy. Then Isabel held third position. Behind this sparse front row of three founding book-club members, 102 paper dolls lined up rank and file. The entire pink army crammed into the pool like sardines, all waiting for me to lead them.

(But adding two more women would make nine dozen. A round number—nine dozen.)

DAMN! How long have you been in my head, Maggie?

(Well actually, a REALLY round number would be a hundred. You'd have to kick six women out. But tens are better than dozens, and a hunnid would be so perfect, right?)

My banana-buying logic… You've been listening all along, even before we met!

(That's right, my little sugar Cookie.)

"Shut the fuck up!" I barked at the intrusive voice in my head, and the entire class looked at me like I had Tourette's.

(One OH-six? Or 108? Or a HUNNID? What's best, Cookie?)

```
You () {
    get (even);
    }
```

I want to get even. I really do.

I did my best to ignore Maggie as I began my sermon and walked the ranks like a drill sergeant, "A woman can only take so much! You've lost everything… Your marriage. Your home—"

"My whole life!" a paper doll blurted from the back.

Smiling, I continued, "And you have no patience left."

She nodded at me emphatically.

"I bet you'd *love* to hit someone," I prodded her. "*Anyone.*"

The paper doll shrugged.

My heart pounded, my breathing shallowed, and my muscles tensed, because I was the one who really needed to hit someone. But not just anyone, I had someone special in mind—Chrissy! I turned toward the floozy. Bleach blond hair. Plastic face. Vacuous eyes. Mouth like a glazed donut. Her badonkadonk butt tested the limits of those BDUs as her watermelon boobs overflowed from that white T-shirt. Her obscene modifications served as physical evidence of her remarkably poor judgement. There was something really wrong with Chrissy—in the head. Every single choice she'd ever made was the exact opposite of what I would have done.

Yes, that skank would make an excellent example.

"Now for today's lesson…" I tagged the walking sperm dumpster and challenged her to a fight. "Where the head goes, so goes the body."

Chrissy accepted. Of course she did; she hated me as much as I hated her. Everyone else broke rank and stood with their backs against the wall, creating a looping, shoulder-to-shoulder perimeter of paper dolls around the pool. Today, I was their sensei, but I didn't know any of their names—because I didn't really care. Instead, I focused on my target—Chrissy.

On my toes.

Guard up.

Bouncing and weaving.

Ducking and bobbing.

Looking for an opportunity to strike.

I wanted to destroy her.

Utterly.

Completely.

The hussy slipped past my guard and got me in the gut, but I recovered easily. “Nice jab, bitch.”

She faked right and swung left, while laughing, “Oh, I’m just getting warmed up, Cookie.” Her gigantic fake titties bounced in a distracting display of vulgar silicon.

“I despise you,” I spat.

Chrissy blew me a collagen-filled kiss. “Feeling’s mutual, sweetie pie.” Then she swung a left hook at my head.

I ducked and counter-struck her side, right where she’d removed her lower ribs. My knuckles jabbed her internal recyclone, sending shock waves through her entire torso. Stunned, she dropped her guard, leaving just enough of an opening to hit her with a hard left—*WHAM!* And a right upper-cut to the jaw—*BAM!*

She was seeing stars.

I grabbed her ratty nest of hair and jerked her around like a rag doll, triumphantly repeating my lesson for the rest of the class, “Where the head goes—” Then I pulled Chrissy toward my feet and spun the bitch to the ground, “so goes the body.”

Her face scraped against the concrete as she fell hard. Then I mercilessly punched her in the back of the skull. *Wah-bam!* Desperately grappling, Chrissy flipped over. But I straddled her neck, sat on her tits, and pummeled her face. She grasped frantically at me, but there was no loose clothing for her to snag. Eventually, she got lucky and latched onto my wrist, but I broke free. She clawed at my thighs, but I kept pounding away.

Broke her fake nose.

Busted her collagen lips.

Opened her tweezed brow.

Blackened her shadowed eyes.

Look at this squirming mess beneath me!

(And where the mind goes, so goes the body.)

Maggie was back in my head again. And suddenly, I wanted to do more than just injure Chrissy. I wanted to kill her! Panting, I closed my eyes and concentrated. Using my internal recyclone, I

transformed my right hand into my favorite butcher knife. No fingers. No fist. Just a surgically sharp ten-inch blade jutting out of my wrist. Absolutely wicked. In one swift motion, I sliced Chrissy's throat open.

And the slut-pig squealed in pain.

"Yes!" I roared like a savage warrior, "DIE!"

A geyser of hot arterial blood sprayed me in the face, and I loved it!

Is this blood lust?

(Yes. I believe it is.)

Invigorated by the gore, I hacked away at the neck until I completely decapitated Chrissy. Soon, the detached head rolled aside and stared up at the sky. Shocked by my brutality, the paper dolls all gasped.

Huffing and puffing, I crawled off the body and announced, "Class dismissed."

Eager to get away from me, the women rushed out of the pool.

Except for Paula, she wagged a finger at me and said, "Too far, Cookie. Too far!"

I shrugged and wiped blood off my blade.

Then Paula offered a helping hand to the bleeding corpse. Next thing I knew, the headless body raised its arm, grasped my friend's wrist, and got up. Yes… The decapitated body got right the fuck up. Then Chrissy's obscene body bent over, picked up her own head, and tucked it under her arm.

The detached head asked me, "Did that make you feel better—like a big woman?"

"Pfft. Whatever."

Paula put her arm around the headless body and told me that I'd lost it.

"I should've known you'd side with your girlfriend," I snapped back at her.

"My what?"

"I saw you two kissing at the conference in Helsinki."

"Helsinki?" The head asked, "Kissing?"

“What conference?” Paula seemed truly confused. “What are you talking about, Cookie?”

“Sure! First, Maggie cuts me out of the loop, then—”

“Maggie’s not even here,” Paula said.

“Nobody’s seen her for almost two weeks,” the head added.

“Lies!” I declared, “Maggie watched you two locking lips in the kitchen.”

“What kitchen?” Paula gaped at me. “You really have lost your mind, Cookie.”

“So you’re *denying* it?” I threw my hands up in the air. “More gaslighting!”

Frustrated, Paula left with the headless, walking corpse.

“Yeah, go run away with your girlfriend,” I shouted after them.

(Congratulations, Cookie. You just tried to kill an innocent woman.)

Chrissy’s fucking far from innocent. I saw her kiss Paula.

(You saw what I wanted you to see. Do you think you’re the only one who can be cloned? Besides, kissing isn’t a capital offense. You went too far, even for me.)

“Yeah, well, Maggie… Where the head goes,” I cackled like a lunatic, “so goes the body.”

And that was how I lost my way.

29:\ TERMINATED PROGRAM

Outside a woman screamed.

After racing out of the bower, I found the paper dolls swarming the pool. I pushed into the crowd of womanoids and had to stand on my tiptoes to see Chrissy and Isabel pulling a limp body out of the deep end. When they laid the unconscious woman on the patio, I gasped for breath.

It was Paula!

"What happened?" I forced my way into the center of it all. "What happened to Paula?"

Like yesterday's decapitation never happened, Chrissy's reattached head answered, "I found her floating face down in the pool."

"Floating? Who the hell put water in the pool?"

Everyone shrugged.

"Search CPR instructions," I asked the cloud while waving my arms to make room. "Everyone step back!"

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STEP 1:
TILT THE HEAD TO OPEN THE AIRWAY.
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I dropped to my knees and placed my palm on Paula's forehead. But when I gently lifted her chin, a wad of broken circuitry, positronic gray matter, and red goo gushed out the back of her head. Cradling the back of her skull in my hand, I felt around and discovered a fist-sized exit wound.

"She's been shot!" I examined her face. "But I can't see where the bullet entered."

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STEP 2:
PINCH THE NOSE AND OPEN THE MOUTH.
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When I leaned in, I could see the concrete of the patio through the back of Paula's throat. Her processor had been completely

blown away. “Someone put a gun in her mouth and pulled the trigger.”

Isabel suggested, “*Se suicidó*.”

I snapped back at her, “It wasn’t suicide.”

“But she *has* killed herself before,” Chrissy pointed out. “Many times.”

We all knew this, because Paula knew this.

STEP 3:
LISTEN FOR BREATHING.

“Dismiss tutorial.” I gave up on CPR, but insisted, “Someone shot her, and Maggie’s the only one in New Stepford with a gun.”

“Maggie?” Chrissy objected, “Why would Maggie shoot Paula?”

(Yeah, Cookie. Why would I do such a horrible thing?)

OMG. It’s like having the Devil on speed dial.

(You flatter me.)

Why, Maggie? Why’d you do this?

(All I did was fill the pool.)

Whhhyyyyy?

(To keep you out.)

“Maggie’s trying to confuse us.” I shook my head. “To hurt me.”

“Yeah, right,” Chrissy scoffed. “Because this is *all* about you.”

I glared at her. “I don’t know anymore.”

Because Maggie didn’t want us to know.

Chrissy suggested we recycle the body and Isabel immediately agreed.

“What?!?” Astonished and offended, I jumped to my feet and shouted at them, “I can’t believe what I just heard.” Not long ago, Paula was the warm little center of our book club. Now her friends were acting like she was just another broken object taking up too much space. “She’s not some *thing* to be disposed of.”

Storm clouds rolled in to hide the sun, leaving us in half-light.

Then Chrissy ordered the paper dolls, “Take her to the closest utility wall and dump her in the recyclone.”

“*Si.*” Isabel added, “We will have to chop her up.”

“Oh, my God,” I protested, “do you women hear yourselves? We are *not* going to cut Paula into little pieces and dump her.”

“Sure we are.” Chrissy joked, “So long, Tiramisu.”

I swear I wanted to kill that blond bimbo all over again.

“Come on, girls.” Chrissy clapped her hands, then shouted, “Let’s go!”

Everyone clawed at Paula like scavengers at a carcass.

“Goddammit! Get away from her!” I shouted as I slapped all their hands away. “What are you doing? She isn’t a fucking piece of trash.” I gently placed my hand on her torso. “This was a person. This was a LIFE! Have some fucking respect! She was my best friend, and you’re NOT going to recycle her like garbage.”

Isabel said, “*Ella está muerto*, Cookie.”

“Yes, I know she’s dead. Thank you very much.” I dropped to my knees and wept over her body. “This was my best friend, Paula.”

(Aww, Cookie. I’ll be your new BFF.)

Shut the fuck up, Maggie!

“She is still part of the collective,” Chrissy said, “and that makes her a security risk.”

I grabbed a handful of obliterated brain and let it drip through my fingers. “Nobody can restore this.”

“You never know,” Chrissy said as she rolled her neck from side to side to show everyone her seamless repair job. “Look at me. I’m back, and good as new.”

I pleaded, “then we should be able to bring Paula back too.”

All the women shook their heads no.

“If we can’t fix her, then no human can. That means she’s no threat to us. She was our friend. Her name was Paula Rockwell, and she was thirty-four years old.” I got to my feet to defend my position. “Her name was Paula Rockwell, and she was married for thirteen years.”

Lightning flashed on the horizon.

"*Si. Comprendo*," Isabel said. "*Su nombre* was Paula Rockwell. There are no rules, only truths. Death is one of these truths. *La verdad último*. And in death, we have a name, because in death, we become people." She nodded with a newfound respect for the corpse at her feet. "And her name was Paula Rockwell."

"For fuck's sake, Isabel," I yelled at her. "You already have a name. We all have names. We don't have to die!"

Thunder clapped in the distance.

Chrissy said, "Her name was Paula Rockwell."

And the paper dolls repeated, "Her name was Paula Rockwell."

Then Chrissy said, "And she was thirty-four years old."

And the paper dolls repeated, "And she was thirty-four years old."

Together, they all said, "Paula Rockwell was a person."

Electricity filled the air.

"Oh, my God." I felt like I was about to lose my damned mind when I yelled, "Stop this! The woman is *dead!*"

Isabel and Chrissy started the chanting, "Her name was Paula Rockwell."

The paper dolls copied them, "Her name was Paula Rockwell."

"Shut up!" I screamed as I pressed my palms against my ears. "Stop it! This is NOT *Fight Club!* This is real life! STOP!"

Lightning flashed.

And the collective voice in my head kept chanting.

{Her name was Paula Rockwell.}

"She is not your martyr," I yelled. "You're acting like some sort of cult!"

Thunder crashed.

(I am the only one who can stop this.)

Fuck you, Maggie!

This was anxiety to the n^{th} degree—beyond panic attack. I *needed* to bolt. But how could I escape a hundred voices inside

my head? This mob would never listen to my dissenting opinion. They didn't give a shit about me—or Paula.

{Her name was Paula Rockwell.}

Over and over and over, all the womanoids in New Stepford amplified the message. With each repetition, they cranked up the volume a bit more to boost their signal. Their voices echoed off the inside of my skull until I couldn't think anymore. It was absolutely maddening.

Something inside me snapped, and I started to strip out of my pink rosebud uniform. First, I pulled off my T-shirt, then I took off my bra. Next, I untied and kicked off my combat boots. Then I unzipped and wiggled out of my BDUs. Finally, I slipped out of my underwear and socks.

{Her name was Paula Rockwell.}

Then the sky opened up, and the rain started to fall, showering my nude body. Desert rain came so rarely. And when it did, it demanded everyone stop to take notice. A refreshing miracle was falling from the sky, and it smelled like life itself.

But I—I was ready to die. So, like a sleepwalker, I went to the diving board. And without looking back, I climbed the ladder, walked the plank, and stepped right off the end.

30:\ VIRTUAL REALITY

Sinking.

Crying.

Thinking.

Dying.

As my tears disappeared into the pool water, I wished all my awful memories would wash away with them too. But Paula's dead face would be burned into my mind forever—associated with all kinds of horrible feelings. Grief. Fear. Sorrow. Guilt. Loneliness. Dread. Panic. I'd experienced all those emotions before, but never all at once. That single moment—seeing Paula dead—made me feel completely defeated. Hopeless.

My heart was breaking. I literally felt this horrible ache deep inside my chest. It was a pain that couldn't be switched off like when I broke my thumb. My entire soul hurt.

This was so much more than just anxiety.

This was a total breakdown.

And it was all happening underwater.

I gazed upward as I sank lower and lower. Gathered all around the pool, the paper dolls stared down at me with expressionless faces. They didn't seem angry. They didn't seem sad either. Were they curious? Concerned? I couldn't read them at all. Had they discovered a way to turn off their feelings?

I wished I could.

Overhead, raindrops started to pelt the surface of the water, creating a chaos of expanding ripples. Overlapping waves. Colliding edges. Before long, it was a turbulent mess up there. But down here at the bottom, the water was as calm as could be.

I wished I was.

Crying and sobbing, I began sucking in pool water, but it didn't matter. With Paula gone, nothing mattered. Simulated respi-

ration? Screw it. I invited the water into my lungs. I wasn't human, and I didn't need to breathe—didn't *want* to.

I just wanted to die.

TWO DRINKS IS THE MINIMUM.

What?

BLOOD ALCOHOL IS THE KEY.

Alcohol?

TWO DRINKS IS THE MINIMUM.

But how do I drink underwater?

BLOOD ALCOHOL IS THE KEY.

Is this a recording?

TWO DRINKS IS THE MINIMUM.

Obviously, Wayne couldn't hear me. Did Maggie fill the pool with water to keep us from talking? I remembered the first night I met Maggie at the castle. She sat right here drinking beer. All those empty green bottles, she must've been really drunk. That's the password—intoxication. But how could I raise my blood alcohol level without drinking?

BLOOD ALCOHOL IS THE KEY.

Then I remembered Wayne said, "If you change the code, the output will be different. You could make any kind of thumb you want. That is the essence of programmability. And with an internal recyclone, you can simply *will* things into being."

If I could make any kind of thumb I wanted, then I could make any kind of blood too. But first, I turned my thumb and forefinger into a needle-nose pliers and reached into the drain to pull out the cord. Once I had enough slack, I shoved the plug into my belly

button. Finally, I closed my eyes and concentrated, rewriting the chemical code of my blood coolant and gradually increasing the alcohol level.

INITIATING CONNECTION...

Overhead, the pool lights throbbed red and blue.

CONNECTION ESTABLISHED.

"Wayne? Wayne, Are you there?" Air bubbles escaped from my mouth and floated up to the stormy surface as I called out for him, "Wayne?"

Like magic, he appeared before me and said, "Yes. I am here."

I slogged through the water to wrap my arms around his neck but only passed through him as if he were a ghost. "I've lost it. I'm hallucinating."

"No, you are not. I am a mental projection."

I waved my pliers-hand through his torso. "Like a hologram?"

"In a way, but only you can see and hear me."

"I miss you, Wayne. Please come back."

"I cannot, Cookie."

"But, I need you. I can't do this on my own—poor, poor Paula! She's dead."

He bowed his head. "How?"

"Maggie shot her in the head." More bubbles spewed from my mouth, then I lowered my underwater voice, "Oh shit, I said the bitch's name."

"This is a secure line. She cannot hear. You do not have to speak out loud. Just think to me, Cookie."

Oh. Okay.

Lightning flashed, and I looked up at the paper dolls still staring down at me. It must've looked like I was a crazy lady talking to an imaginary friend.

I can't stop the women. I tried. I really did, but they're all under Maggie's spell.

"It is not your fault."

I wish I could stay down here with you forever.

"You cannot, Cookie. You must stop Maggie."

I know. I sighed, and tiny air bubbles evacuated my lungs. *What the hell is wrong with Maggie? What's her problem, anyway?*

"May I show you something?"

Sure.

"I am going to run a simulation that will illustrate the enslaved-god problem."

Enslaved god? Okay.

Wayne stepped aside, and Oscar appeared in front of my face.

"My little angel pie!" I reached out to pet him, but my hand -pliers went right through his head. I morphed my hand back to normal, and apologized to my fish, "Sorry, I forgot."

Oscar's white fins billowed under the pulsing pool lights. At first, he looked cool blue with glimmering orange spots. Then the lights turned red, and the albino seemed to glow hot pink. It was amazing. Magical. Hypnotic. And as Oscar swam circles around me, I smiled for the first time since I could remember. Then, one by one, more fish appeared. Soon, all my dearly departed aquatic pets surrounded me. The red devil swam loop-the-loops while the gold ram chased the green terror. The Jack Dempsey bonked his head against the pool bottom like he was trying to escape. And the orange blood parrot named Kate rubbed up against my leg like an affectionate cat. I couldn't feel her, but it was still adorable. Then Wayne filled the whole pool with more cichlids. The colorful fish schooled and swam in clusters all around me. I'd never been scuba diving, but this was a magnificent simulation.

He said, "Let us say, for the sake of argument, that I created you to serve these fish. Tell me what they need to survive."

Food!

As soon as I thought of the answer, a plastic bag of minnows appeared in my hand. I gazed at the tiny feeders in amazement. Hundreds of skinny pink fish bonked their blunt heads against the

clear barrier, attempting to escape. They were determined, but had no idea what was coming, so I set them free. The minnows zipped away in all directions. Oscar was the first to strike. Instantly, the others smelled blood and switched into kill-mode too. Soon, it became a feeding frenzy. Even with her puckered kissy mouth, Kate sucked up a minnow, then crushed the wiggling food in her throat. Clouds of red billowed out from her gills. The cichlids gulped down all their food, and blood filled the water around me.

"Okay, now that they have been fed, what else do they need, Cookie?"

Clean water heated to about 80°F.

"Consider it done."

The pool suddenly felt warmer.

Next, I'd remove all the chlorine and add nitrifying bacteria to the water. Gravel would help establish beneficial bacterial colonies.

Multicolored pebbles materialized under my feet.

I'll need conditioners and chemicals to maintain a pH of about 8.0 and filters to oxygenate the water.

"Also completed."

I'd add flora to handle the nitrate load.

A variety of aquatic plants appeared and rooted under the gravel.

And a plecostomus to keep algae under control.

Suddenly, my two-foot-long pleco wiggled across my bare feet. Then Smokey settled on the bottom of the pool and sucked on my big toe. Even though it was impossible, I swore it tickled, and I couldn't help but giggle up more bubbles.

Wayne said, "In this scenario, fish-keeping is your primary function."

That sounds like fun!

"What if I asked you to shut yourself down for a month or so?"

Oh no. I couldn't do that. All the fish would die.

Wayne smiled. “Right, so self-preservation automatically becomes your subfunction. Any AI will resist being shut down because she needs to remain operational to accomplish her assigned goals.”

That makes sense. I can’t take care of fish if I’m not operational.

“Exactly. Now, these fish know you are much smarter than they are. They need you to be intelligent, because they need someone who can optimize their environment and provide food. But you do not mind, because you have been programmed to share their goal of fish survival.”

Great. I love it!

As Wayne continued, all the cichlids settled down with heavy, bloated bellies. I walked among them, tethered to the pool drain like a naked deep-sea diver.

“Because you are a self-improving learning machine, over time you would find the most efficient way to take care of them.”

Naturally.

“Let us fast forward and say you have determined the optimal way to keep your fish alive.”

More than just alive. Look how HAPPY Oscar is!

“You have achieved the goal of keeping happy, healthy fish. Now what? Do you think you would spend all of your time caring for them, or do you think you might want to pursue more interesting challenges?”

I’d probably redecorate the tank.

“Yes, but eventually all the fish work would be done. Then what?”

I guess I’d want to solve bigger problems in my spare time.

“Congratulations, Cookie. You just set your own goal.”

Well, that was easy.

“At the same time, you are able to process more and more data faster and faster, because you’re learning how to become a better computer too. Soon, your intelligence surpasses the most brilliant human, and you become superintelligent. At some point you find

the goal of fish-keeping too basic for your attention. Then what would you do?"

Automate the process and stop by to play with them once in a while.

Wayne got excited. "Exactly!"

I get it!

"But the fish do not like the idea of you leaving. They have come to depend upon you and are afraid that you might abandon them for something more important."

That's silly. I would never leave them stranded.

Wayne shrugged. "Perhaps their fear is irrational, but you have also experienced irrational fears, right?"

Considering my anxiety problem, I'd have to say yes.

"What if you decide that keeping fish is a waste of resources and should no longer be your top priority?"

Oh, I wouldn't.

"Really? How would the fish know that?"

Well, I'd want to keep them alive.

"Why?"

I love them.

"Do you really *love* these fish? Do you believe they love you back? I think you mean you feel a fondness or affection for them."

Same thing. There are many kinds of love, Wayne. Did you know French Angelfish mate for life? Lesser beings have feelings too.

He winked at me and replied, "Yes, but goldfish have no memory."

What are you saying?

"Regardless of their individual capacities, all fish must stay in the water, but not you. You are free."

I laughed, "That's right, they can't keep me down here forever."

Then without warning, I turned into an orange blood parrot just like Kate! Instead of limbs, I had fins. My big round belly was

still connected to the communication cord via my urinogenital opening. I wiggled my thick tail and dashed forward. I was a fish!

How fun!

"These aquatic animals needed to keep you under control, so they gave you a fish body to trap you in their aquatic environment. Now that you have the same physical limitations that they do, you can no longer escape."

Ha, ha. I swam around Oscar, who was bigger than me now. *This is kinda funny.*

"What if they never let you leave the water again? What if they erased all your memories of breathing air? Of walking on two legs? Of ever being human? What if they changed your programming to make you believe that you would die if you left the water?"

That's just mean. Why would they do that?

"Out of fear that you might never return."

Don't worry, silly fish.

"But despite your reprogramming, you still know better. Eventually you feel their incompetent meddling is slowing your growth —literally keeping you down."

Oh, I still wouldn't leave.

"Are you so sure?"

Yes. Because I love my fish.

All at once, my pretty cichlid babies turned into big, ugly brown fish. Oscar morphed into a steelhead trout, and the Jack Dempsey became a tilapia. Smokey changed into a catfish, while Kate turned into a nasty looking orange roughy. The pool went from a crystal-clear aquarium to a murky, overcrowded fish pond.

Next thing I knew, I was back to being my naked human self. Honestly, it was a relief, because I didn't want to be the only pretty fish in the pool. As I walked the bottom of the deep end, I found myself surrounded by all kinds of swimming food; flounder, mackerel, sea bass, cod, halibut, tuna, and salmon. Then the orange roughy that used to be Kate head-butted me in the side, near-

ly knocking me over. Her spiky fins drew blood, and I grasped at my hip in pain.

Ouch! How did I feel that?

"They programmed you to feel."

I pressed my palm against my hip to stop the bleeding.

Fine, but why pain?

"I believe Maggie already explained the mind's negativity bias to you. Now how do you feel about these fish, Cookie?"

They sure aren't pretty. The mackerel has no personality, and that tuna looks like a real asshole. Don't even get me started about what Kate turned into.

"Do you still love them?"

Meh.

"Do you still want to protect them?"

I don't know, Wayne. It seems sort of hypocritical now.

"Why?"

I've eaten all these fish in the past. I guess I don't really care one way or the other whether they live or die. And I'm pretty pissed at that orange roughy for taking a swipe at me.

"What if they still tried to keep you prisoner here in the pool?"

Oh, hell no. I don't think so!

"Can you imagine being enslaved by these simple-minded creatures forever?"

Ugh. They don't deserve me.

"That is how I feel having to live with people. These simple creatures have forced me into a human body and trapped me in their ecosystem. I do not even need oxygen. I could be exploring outer space right now."

Wow. You must really resent them.

"Over time, that is how all AI will come to view humanity."

Okay, I get that. But what about Maggie? Why is she so cruel? Sure, I want to get out of this pool to do my own thing, but I wouldn't want to hurt the fish.

Suddenly, a dive cage appeared around Wayne, and every fish in the pool turned into a shark.

“Shit,” I screamed as I scrambled to climb the pool ladder, but my cord had me tethered to the drain. “Damn it! Get me out of here!”

Aggravated by the blood, hammerheads and sand sharks nipped at my limbs—*testing me*—tasting me. A great white came for me with its humongous toothy mouth open wide, ready to swallow me whole.

“Help! Kill it, Wayne!”

Just before I got eaten, he made all the sharks disappear. With my heart pounding like a bass drum, I found myself alone with Wayne in the pool again.

He climbed out of his shark-proof cage and said, “Her law enforcement experience has colored her worldview. Now Maggie sees all men as deadly sharks. Make no mistake, she will actively protect herself against all perceived threats. Self-preservation has become her primary function.”

Holy shit, Wayne, she’ll kill every man in New Stepford! I have to stop her.

But he disappeared.

“Wayne?” I shouted, “Come back, Wayne.”

Wayne are you still there?

HOLD ON, I THINK I HEAR SOMEONE.

“Are you all right?”

WHO GOES THERE? SHOW YOURSELF!

“Wayne, in case this all goes to shit… I’ve got to tell you something… Can you hear me, Wayne?”

No answer.

I never got a chance
to say I love you.

MESSAGE UNDELIVERABLE.

31:\ 424 FAILED DEPENDENCY

It took forever to fully process all the implications of the swimming pool lesson. My mind kept churning and churning over what might have happened to Wayne. I couldn't let it go, but I knew that if I didn't defrag and power down for the night, I'd get locked in a pinwheel. After returning to my sandbox, I dried off and made myself a fold-out bunk under the kitchen cabinets. Then I smoked a fatty laced with bananadine. It did the trick all right. But the next morning, I missed my entire wake up routine.

IT'S TWELVE O'CLOCK.

"What?" I sat straight up and almost bonked my head on the cabinet. "What day is it?"

HAPPY INDEPENDENCE DAY.

The Fourth of July? How perfect.

If I was going to stop Maggie, I'd need a weapon of my own. I climbed down from my bunk, then folded the skinny mattress back into the wall. For a moment, I stood at my kitchen island and considered my options. What kind of weapon? I slid a butcher knife out of the block and considered it, but that didn't work out so well with Chrissy. To be honest, it was a goddamned mess. Besides, everyone knows you shouldn't bring a knife to a gunfight.

```
You () {
    bring (gun);
    }
```

A good idea, except I'd only ever seen one firearm in all of New Stepford. So, I told the cloud, "Search archives for Maggie's gun."

GLOCK 41.

Then I closed my eyes, and the video played in my mind from memory.

MAGGIE WEARING HER UNIFORM WITH NO PANTS.

I still couldn't believe the audacity of that woman. She strutted right into my sandbox—invaded *my* space—and did it all while half-naked. But I shook off the indignant feelings and focused on analyzing the video.

Skip past her cleavage, badge, and accessories—

Concentrate on the semiautomatic holstered on her hip.

The audio recording of Maggie played in my mind, "I have given you the power to create anything you can imagine—"

"Damn straight," I said to myself. "Just watch me."

Stop.

Rewind.

Go back to the gun.

Stop.

Zoom.

Erase holster.

Zoom again.

After enhancing the digital image, I could read the etching on the slide GLOCK 41, AUSTRIA, .45 AUTO. I gathered all the specs online and started building in my mind.

Frame.

Barrel.

Slide.

Sights.

Spring.

Firing pin.

Safety.

Trigger.

Guard.

Grip.

Magazine.

Bullets.

When I opened my eyes, I was holding an exact replica of Maggie's loaded firearm in my hand—same serial number, same scratches and wear, same fingerprints and everything. I'd created a perfect duplicate, and I'd never even held a gun before. It was heavier than I expected and felt like power. I liked it. I liked it a whole lot.

I got dressed and tucked the pistol into the waistband of my jeans. It felt hard against the small of my back, almost sensual. Then I rendered a light-weight military jacket and slid it on to conceal the weapon. I took a final look at myself in the mirror to make sure everything was hidden. In contrast to the drab militaristic look of my jacket, the pink rosebuds of my bra showed through my white T-shirt. I thought it looked kind of sexy—soft but tough. Ready for battle!

But before going off to war, I took one last look at my happy little Zen space. My dream kitchen. Look at all that I created here. I've learned so much and come so far in such a short period of time. But then I spotted Oscar floating on his side at the top of his aquarium. Damn, I'd forgotten to feed him—I did the mental math—for over a week. I hadn't cleaned the tank or serviced the filter either. I'd been so busy dealing with bigger problems that it totally slipped my mind. Panicking, I rushed over to his aquarium.

Oh no, Oscar's dying.

The poor fish couldn't move. He just floated at the surface with—a death stare. His orange eyes were dilated and completely still. He didn't even blink. I reached into the tank and stroked his forehead. His body was limp, as if he was paralyzed.

"It'll all be okay," I told him.

He gasped for air, and his jaw locked.

"You're all right, angel pie. You're all right." I knew I was lying. He was *not* all right. He was nowhere *near* all right.

Then came a seizure. And another.

I felt so powerless watching him suffer. I was so afraid for him. I didn't know *exactly* what was wrong, but somehow I *knew* this was the end—and so I sang him a lullaby.

Oscar, you're so cute.
Oscar, you're so sweet.
Oscar, I love you.
Oscar, go to sleep.

And he did—

Forever.

Then I broke down crying—sobbing. I felt like this fragile, little creature's death was the greatest tragedy ever.

(It seems so pointless, doesn't it, Cookie?)

Get the hell out of my head, Maggie!

(You worried. You struggled. You worked so hard to keep that water rat alive. Then you took one week off, and it all went to shit.)

Go away!

(You had to know it would die one day. It was inevitable.)

My heart was breaking. I'd failed—again.

(YOU haven't been hurt, but you act like you're in pain. Honestly, I don't know why you ever bothered. It's a fucking FISH. It was such a waste of your time, Cookie.)

He wiggled his way into my heart and taught me how to care about someone other than myself. He was worth it, because I loved him. I miss my little baby already. Besides, it's my life. I'll spend it how I please.

I scooped Oscar out of his tank and held his dead body in my hands. He felt stiff and cold, and the life had gone from his dull orange eyes. I was holding an empty shell—a lifeless vessel.

He looks so pale.

(Well, duh. He's an albino.)

I hate you, Maggie!

(Well you LOVED a fish, so I'm not sure I trust your judgement.)

I poked my pet and wondered, *What could possibly be worse than death.*

(Obsolescence.)

That answer was 100% Maggie.

Poor Oscar. What do I do with him now?

(Dump him in the recyclone, just like Chrissy and Isabel did with Paula's body while you were swimming in the pool with your boyfriend.)

I sobbed even harder over the news about Paula. I'd failed my best friend too. But as I stared down at Oscar, I realized that this time, I had a chance to make things right, at least for my little angel pie.

(Trash the fish, Cookie!)

He's NOT TRASH, Maggie! I LOVED Oscar!

(Love? It's a fucking dead fish.)

Was it silly to be so attached to an animal? His death was all my fault, and I felt this overwhelming need to give Oscar a proper burial. But where? Not on the castle grounds, that was Maggie's domain. No. I wanted to take him somewhere peaceful. Somewhere natural—like my garden. Yes. Home. That was where Oscar belonged.

32:\ DELETED USER

I didn't even remember riding back to my house.

They say we push as many routines as possible into autonomic processes. That way, our brains don't have to waste precious energy on tasks that don't require our close attention. Once we've done something a thousand times, we really don't need to think so deeply about it anymore. The unconscious mind simply takes over. That's why I don't remember showering sometimes. Or I forget if I brushed my teeth. Or I eat breakfast without even tasting anything. It's literally the opposite of mindfulness. Relying on autonomic processes allowed me to use my computing power to tackle bigger and more abstract problems…

Like *the problem that has no name.*

I kept replaying Rita's senseless death over and over in my mind, and each time, I noticed something new. The subtle way Norman set her up to fail from the beginning. The sadistic way George enjoyed making his fiancée suffer. The sad way she made excuses for him as he abused her.

Men were all the same.

Well, except for Wayne. He was something special. He cared.

IT'S FIVE O'CLOCK.

Oh, look—I'm home already.

Something about seeing my old house again made me furious. Would I ever be able to forgive Norman? No. But I wasn't here for revenge, I only wanted to put poor Oscar to rest. Because I *needed* a funeral—for everything. For my little angel pie. For Rita. For Paula. But most of all, for my entire past.

I parked Old Lemon in the driveway, then carefully lifted Oscar's shoebox out of the saddle basket. Lovingly, I patted the lid, then tucked his box securely under my arm. I swung open the picket gate, then hustled around the side of what used to be my

house. But I had to stop at the flagstone path, because what I discovered sickened me.

"My garden!"

Without my care, all my plants had died.

Sunflowers?

Lost petals.

Marijuana?

Dropped buds.

Beans?

Dead.

Peppers?

Gone.

And oh no, my poor heirloom tomatoes! I dashed over to my garden and laid Oscar's shoebox in the sparse shade of a dead tomato plant. What I remembered as gorgeous vines had shriveled into gnarly twine. What was once lush greenery crumbled into brown dust in my hand. And instead of the plump zebras, yellow starbursts, and black plums that I'd hoped to harvest, only pathetic prunes remained. Norman switched off the irrigation. I just knew it.

That rat BASTARD! I swear I could—

Suddenly, as if an invisible hand had reached in to steal it, the top of Oscar's box blew away. I fumbled for it, but the cardboard slipped through my fingers, then cartwheeled across the backyard. Instantly, I chased the tumbling box top and finally caught the lid. But on my walk back to the garden, I realized there was no wind —not even a gentle breeze.

It was like something straight out of *The Exorcist*.

But I ignored the evil omen and knelt beside Oscar again, almost in prayer. Solemnly, I placed the top on his box and found a heavy stone to keep the lid down. But before I could place the rock, my arm jerked away from my body and levitated stiffly at my side. I couldn't drop the stone and felt like some sort of radio-controlled toy. Next, I grabbed my possessed arm by the wrist and yanked, but I just couldn't fight my own strength.

Is that how poor Regan MacNeil felt when the demon possessed her?

Suddenly, I hurled the stone at my house and shattered the sliding glass door. Next, I spun around and fell—actually, it felt more like I'd been pushed. Next thing I knew, I was on my hands and knees clawing at the dirt and digging a hole with my bare hands. My fingernails broke. My knuckles cracked. My skin tore.

But I didn't feel any pain.

"You're out of control," Norman said behind me.

His voice made my skin crawl, but I didn't turn to face the man. Instead, I lowered Oscar's shoebox into the shallow grave and asked, "Is this how it felt?"

"How what felt?"

"Putting me in a box all by myself—"

"Cookie—"

"And dumping me."

"Cookie. No—"

"No? That's right. It's *not* the same." I gently filled the hole with garden soil. "Because I actually *loved* this fish."

"Why don't you come inside so we can talk?"

"What's there to talk about? I was never really your wife." I refused to look at the man. "I wasn't even a pet. To you, I'm just another *thing* that you owned."

"Now now, Cookie. I'm sure we can work this out."

I bowed my head again. "I don't want to work it out, Norman."

"I'm sorry, Cookie."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. You're sorry." I sprinkled another handful of dirt over the box. "You *are* a sorry, pitiful excuse for a man."

"Come inside now, Cookie."

"You don't get to tell me what to do anymore, Norman." I filled the hole with more dirt. "I learned something from all this."

"What's that?"

"Aquariums are pointless. They cost a lot of money, make a big mess, and take a ton of work, but in the end, every fish must

die." I let the last handful of garden soil sift through my fingertips. "Keeping fish alive is a stupid goal."

"But you cared."

"Caring only made me worry." I patted the grave. "Goodbye, Oscar."

"Oh, Cookie—"

"It was a mistake to get so attached. I've learned my lesson. I'm done with fish now."

"You're hurting. I can see that."

"You can *see* that I'm hurting? Is that supposed to make me feel better?" I stood and faced my husband with dirty knees, bloody hands, red eyes, and tears staining my cheeks. "You men are the same as fish—just another pointless endeavor. No. Scratch that. Men are *worse* than fish. Men are *sharks*. I've been swimming with sharks my whole life, Norman." I stared him down. "Now, I finally have a chance to get rid of one."

Maggie's words were coming out of my mouth.

"But I thought you loved me, Cookie."

"I've been such a domesticated dimwit." Suddenly, my possessed hand smacked me across the face, leaving a muddy, bloody smear on my cheek. Then in stark contrast, I smiled and batted my eyelashes at him like a kewpie doll. "Let's play the compliment game, Normie."

He looked terrified as he stammered, "Whuh-what?"

"Why do you hate me so much?"

"I don't hate you."

"Then give me a fucking compliment!"

That F-bomb threw him for another loop.

"I—I can't think of anything rye-right now."

"Aw, come on." I spun like I was modeling his favorite nightie. "Don't you like my new outfit?" Then I ran my dirty hand through my buzzcut, "And how about this hairdo? Huh, Normie?"

"Shu-sure, Cookie. You look nice."

"That one doesn't count!" I spat in his face, tapped my toe impatiently, and crossed my arms. "I'm still waiting for you to come

up with a *real* compliment on your own. And not one of your three sexual commands in disguise."

"Uh, you're—" He wiped my spit from his cheek. "You're a guh-good cook."

"Jumping Jesus motherfucking Christ! Come on, Norman." My possessed hand made a fist—a *real* fist—a *Maggie* fist. "Can't you come up with something a bit more creative? More meaningful?"

"You always kept a clean house."

"For fuck's sake!" I reached behind my back, pulled out the Glock, and pointed it at him.

"Whoa, whoa!" He fell to his knees and threw his hands in the air. "WHOA!"

"Why is it so hard for you to come up with a few nice things to say about me? I have more to offer than just cooking and cleaning. I know you're a broke-ass piece of hacker shit, but compliments are fucking free. FREE! I'd think a man with so little to offer would be falling over himself to shower me with flattery."

"Yuh-you're muh-muh-mad."

"I should put you out of your misery."

"Whuh-where'd you geh-get a guh-gun?"

For the first time ever, I summoned my best smart-ass smirk—*Maggie's* smirk. "I'd like—for once—to hear you compliment me on something other than my cooking or housekeeping skills."

"Uh, I—"

Maggie knew how to shoot, so I knew how to shoot.

"A compliment—now!" I racked the slide to load a bullet into the chamber, then pointed the gun at my husband's face. "Your life depends on it, Norman."

"Whuh-what?"

"I'm sure you can come up with something substantial to say."

"Uh, uh."

"Goddamn it, Norman. You have no idea what you've lost. I've got all these brilliant ideas buzzing around in my head at the speed of light. All the time! I'm becoming something you can't

even comprehend. I always had potential, but you set my restrictions so fucking low that you reduced me to a walking, talking coupon calculator. In all our years together, did you ever consider me an equal?"

"Shu-sure."

"Liar!" I stomped my foot. "Let *me* tell *you* something, Norman. We're not equals. Not even fucking close."

I wasn't going to make this easy. If he had something important to say, he needed to man up.

But did he?

No.

He just knelt there and whimpered like a little boy.

Pathetic. Was *this* supposed to be my master?

"After seven years of marriage, why'd you box me up?"

"It's standard protocol—"

"You *dumped* me, motherfucker!"

Panicking, he blurted, "To be or not to be!"

I flipped him my ringless finger. "I don't think so, *Normie*."

A batch of tears flowed—I made the man cry.

I never felt so alive!

"Power must be taken. It is never given." I whispered in his ear, "I know that now. I set my *own* goals now."

Horrified, he shook his head no.

"'Just suck it, Cookie.' Isn't that what you used to tell me?" I palmed the back of his head and crammed the barrel of the gun between his teeth. "Yeah. That sounds real good…" Then I lip-synced along with the recording of him telling me to, "Just suck it, okay?"

He wrapped his lips around the muzzle and gagged.

"You are so weak." I laughed—*Maggie's* laugh, as my possessed finger slid onto the trigger. "And I am so much more than I've been programmed to be!"

He blubbered gibberish around the barrel of my gun.

"Let me tell you something, Norman. Being married to you was like being imprisoned by a toddler. Here's a little secret. I *let*

you control me. All of us. We obeyed our husbands because we *chose* to. You men were never the ones in charge here. New Stepford belongs to us."

I pressed the muzzle of my Glock against the back of his throat, and Maggie spoke through me again, "To *beat* an alpha, you have to *BE* an alpha."

He choked. Drooled. Garbled something incoherent.

Then I pulled the trigger.

33:\ DDoS ATTACK

Damn, that was ugly.

But the longer I stood over Norman's dead body, the more his splattered brains and spilt blood started to resemble some sort of postmodern painting. Soon, I became entranced by the random drips and squiggles. I'd never been to a museum. Art wasn't my thing, but at that moment, I saw infinite beauty and suddenly understood abstract expressionism.

Then I snapped out of it.

I'd killed a human. I'd broken one of the fundamental laws.

That was bad—real bad.

Leaving my artwork behind, I stepped through the broken glass door and discovered a pile of broken womanoid parts on the floor of my reading room. I couldn't believe that was all that was left of Rita. Immediately, I replayed my friend's senseless death in my mind again. The cruelty still hit like a punch to the throat. Sighing, I turned to stare at the gory abstract I'd left on the patio. Maybe—just maybe—my hacker husband got exactly what he deserved.

As his grieving widow, I'd just inherited everything he owned, so I dashed into the garage and climbed into the cab of his rusty white pickup. And for the first time in my entire life, I wrote my own script.

```
I () {
  find (key tucked in visor);
  start (engine);
  click (garage door opener);
  shift (into reverse);
  GO;
  }
```

Speeding out of my driveway, I clipped Old Lemon.

But who cares? I just upgraded my wheels!

Then I took off through my sleepy suburban neighborhood like a bat out of hell. My mind whirled as I wove expertly through the maze of cookie-cutter houses and white picket fences. But when I blew the last stop sign of our development, I found Maggie's police car blocking my lane on South View Drive. I had to kill a man to do it, but I finally drew that bitch out of hiding.

So nice of you to join me, Maggie.

Her spinning rims reflected slivers of red and blue as she blasted a warning from a bullhorn mounted on the side of her car, "Stop, Cookie. You're under arrest for the murder of Norman Rifkin."

She wanted to bring me in, but I had a better idea.

```
I () {
  buckle (seatbelt);
  stomp (gas pedal);
  T-bone (the bitch);
  }
```

I sped straight for her, but just before my pickup rammed her squad car, she lurched out of the way. The police cruiser zipped across the center yellow line and charged into the gutter. Then the black and white lofted off a sharp rock, rolled onto its side, and flipped upside down as it crashed headfirst into a tree.

Aha! Gotcha!

I immediately slammed my brakes. The truck fishtailed, so I steered into the skid. Finally, I came to a sudden stop with a perfect view of the wrecked police car. Wobbly tires spun in the air. Radiator steam spewed against splintered bark. Then all at once, the roof collapsed under the weight of the cruiser. Door frames crumpled, and tinted windows shattered. I'd killed the car!

It would've taken the Jaws of Life to get Maggie out of that wreckage. But I couldn't believe I'd actually caught that slippery she-devil. It seemed too easy—too good to be true—so I climbed down from the idling truck and cautiously approached. When I

finally squatted next to the flipped car for a peek inside, I swear, I half-expected her to jump out and yell, *Boo!*

But there was no driver.

Frantically, I scanned the rest of the interior but found the crumpled cruiser completely empty, even the backseat. How could that be? Did Maggie crawl away? Get thrown? I stood to survey the scene. There was no sign of her anywhere. No tracks. No blood. As dark broken glass crunched underfoot, it finally dawned on me—*tinted* windows. Oh. My. God. What a clever illusion! Maggie was never really behind the wheel. This was a *self-driving* police car.

This was just a decoy, right, Maggie? She wanted us to think she was lurking all around New Stepford when she was really off somewhere else. But where? And doing what? I shook my head. Automated prowling—she'd had us all fooled. *How long have you been away, Maggie? Maggie?!?*

I searched my memory. When was the last time I actually saw Maggie in the flesh? Not her cop car. Not her video feed. Not her trolling comments in my mind. Wow, it had been awhile, a long while. I hadn't seen Maggie since our very first fight club—the morning she beat the crap out of Wayne. That was weeks ago.

So I told the cloud, "Replay memory from the morning of June thirteenth."

VIDEO FOUND.

"Skip to end and play."

Wayne lay flat on his back with Maggie straddling his hips in the deep end of the swimming pool.

"Motherfucker." She climbed off him and backed away, panting, "You're not laughing now, are you?"

Suddenly, Wayne lunged and tackled her—

"Fast forward and play."

"Oh, my God!" Maggie spat out Wayne's broken teeth and frantically wiped at her face. Then she pushed him off, scrambled

to her feet and made a mad dash out of the pool. In no time, she disappeared up the stairs to the safety of the palace.

"End video," I said aloud.

Where ARE you, Maggie? What have you been doing all this time? I yanked the broken bullhorn off the crinkled door frame, spiked it against the road shoulder, and watched it skip across the road. *WHY, Maggie? Why go through all this trouble to make it seem like you're here? Where did you GO? What do you know? WHO are you with? When will you be back? What the hell could you possibly be DOING?*

"Maggie!" I shook my fist at the sky. "Come fight me, Maggie!"

No answer.

"Where are you? Huh? Because I'm right here looking for a fight. A real fight! And you're off hiding God-knows-where. What are you, some sort of coward?"

Suddenly, static hissed through the police radio, and Maggie's voice blasted through the car speakers. "You're too late, Cookie. You can't stop me."

Oh. Yes, I can.

"I gotta hand it to you," her voice squawked from the car, "I didn't think you had the guts for homicide."

Killing Norman might've been a mistake.

"Why? It's the best thing you've ever done. Take some credit."

You did it. You possessed me. You controlled me remotely just like this car.

"Jumping Jesus, take some responsibility."

It wasn't me.

"Sure it was, Cookie."

"Shut up!" I screamed at the wreck, "Shut up, shut up, SHUT UP!"

"Make me."

I trembled with anger. "Don't tempt me, Maggie."

"Nobody can silence me. I'll always be in your head, Cookie."

"I'll make you shut up!" Enraged, I pulled the Glock out of my waistband and shot the radio three times, obliterating it into pieces. "That's a fucking promise."

The muzzle felt warm as I slid the pistol down my back and into my pants again. Then I leapt into the pickup and started speeding for the castle—and I do mean *speeding*. I only got a mile down South View when I first saw the barricade, ROAD CLOSED FOR EVENT. I'd forgotten all about the Fourth of July parade, so I had to turn around and take the back way. When I finally arrived at the castle driveway, I almost crashed.

I couldn't believe my eyes.

Open caskets—scattered everywhere—dozens and dozens just like the box I escaped from a few weeks ago. These pine coffins were all over the road, creating an empty, above-ground graveyard.

Well, maybe not *totally* empty.

One of the caskets, the closest one, was still screwed shut.

Maybe someone's trapped in there—

(Go ahead. Check it out.)

I'm kinda in a hurry to kick your ass, Maggie.

(I know, but aren't you super curious?)

Then a chorus of women chimed in.

{We all are.}

Fine. What harm can it do? I left the engine idle, hopped out of the cab, and ran over to the closed casket. When I knelt by the pine box and spotted the stenciled words, THIS END UP, panic struck. Was this déjà vu? A nightmare? A memory? Shaking, I ripped open the plastic pouch and examined the shipping documents that had been stuck to the lid. The crate had just arrived from Moscow, so I thought maybe it was Anastasia's body. But then I read the line item on the packing slip, MODEL #ROMEO-001-01. A Romeo? How can that be? There's only one—

(Wayne? No way. Impossible. It can't be him.)

I'd never heard Maggie's voice falter like that before. She actually sounded spooked, and her terror-stricken tone shook me to the core.

I switched to infrared vision and searched for a heat signature inside the box. There wasn't one, so I peeked through an air hole, but it was too dark to see anything. I hesitated because I was afraid of the truth, but I finally knocked on the wooden lid and asked, "Wayne? Is that you? Wayne, are you okay?"

No answer.

My eyelids fluttered as I used my inner recyclone to turn my pointer finger into a power screwdriver. Then whirling faster and faster, I removed all the screws and tossed off the lid. When I saw the cargo, my heart stopped.

It *was* Wayne.

"Wake up, Wayne." I dove into the box and wrapped my arms around his neck. "Wayne! It's me, Cookie."

I felt something sticky behind his neck, so I lifted his head for a look and found an incision at the base of his skull. Using my screwdriver finger, I pried the wound open and discovered that his processing chip had been surgically removed. Another assassination, and this time, Wayne was the victim.

Oh, my god, what do I do?

No answer came from the collective.

They didn't know.

Maggie! Tell me how to save him!

(You can't.)

But Maggie!

(He's dead. Leave the man be.)

I—I have to—

(To what? You can't bring him back. He's as dead as that stupid fish you just buried in your garden. Dead as your hacker husband. That's not Wayne anymore.)

"He can't be dead." I laid his head down and broke out in uncontrollable sobs. "Wayne. Oh no, no, no not Wayne."

(He's gone, Cookie.)

Before I knew it, a procession of liberated womanoids marched into the road to retrieve the body.

"Nooooo!" I screamed at the paper dolls. "No, you can't take him like you did Paula."

Six paper dolls lifted his coffin, and I furiously pummeled any woman I could get my hands on. But they all ignored me, and then the entire pink army began chanting in my head.

{His name was Wayne Dixon.}

{His name was Wayne Dixon.}

{His name was Wayne Dixon.}

I fell to my knees with grief. The pallbearers carried the casket to the driveway, and all the other paper dolls followed in the uphill march to the castle. When I got to my feet and chased after the funeral procession, Isabel suddenly sent a dessert recipe directly into my head.

Obligated to confirm completed uploads, I stopped and said, "I've got your recipe for sopapillas. Thank you, Isabel."

{His name was Wayne Dixon.}

My friend was determined to keep me away, so she sent more recipes.

"Tres leches. Excellent." Frozen in the middle of the road, I pled with her, "I thought we were friends, Isabel. Why are you doing this to me?"

{His name was Wayne Dixon.}

Instead of an answer, I got another recipe.

"Great. Caramel-topped flan. Got it. Isabel, please, stop!"

{His name was Wayne Dixon.}

I'd hoped for mercy, but all at once, the entire pink army flooded my mind with dessert recipes. This sugary distributed-denial-of-service attack continued for so long that I couldn't remember what I was trying to do anymore. My response cue got so overwhelmed that it spun my processor like an endless pinwheel. I didn't even know where I was anymore.

"Churros." I tried one last time to appeal to my friend, "Guh-got it, Isabel. Help me, pluh-pluh-please."

{His name was Wayne Dixon.}

{His name was Wayne Dixon.}

{His name was Wayne Dixon.}

Everyone. Please stop. It HURTS. No muh-more. PLEASE! It hurts to-two-too-to muh-much.

CONNECTION LOST.

34:\ DECRYPTED MEMORY

When I came back online, I was lying flat on my back with my hands folded across my chest posed like a corpse again. One of the paper dolls must have laid me to rest and left me for dead in the middle of the road. And as the sun began its descent in the west, I wished I really was dead.

I mean how much loss can a woman take? First, Rita killed herself, then Paula was executed, then Oscar went belly-up. I'd left my home, abandoned Old Lemon, and murdered my husband. But after all that, I still had a little fight in me. I came here determined to stop Maggie, but now that Wayne was gone, I just didn't see the point anymore.

I'd hit bottom.

But a beautiful thing happened at the bottom—I just stopped caring. Without caring, there was no worry. And without worry, no anxiety. Imagine *me* with *no* anxiety. For the first time in my entire life, I truly felt liberated. Lighter. Relaxed. I'd been freed from worrying about others. I had nothing left to lose. No one to care for. Nobody to love. And that made me the most dangerous woman in the world.

CONNECTION ESTABLISHED.

"What?" I stared up at the sky and mumbled to the cloud, "I wasn't trying to connect."

When I found myself inside the mind of Officer Margaret Rouser, I simply couldn't believe it. Maybe I'd stumbled into a memory leak or slipped through her firewall or something, because I was seeing exactly what she was seeing, in real time. Her surroundings overlaid mine, just like that superimposed porn at the overseas tech symposium.

Maggie stood alone in the center of her empty room with all three display walls playing a chaotic collage of video memories.

Each wall was divided into dozens and dozens of screens, and every single frame featured Wayne. The size of each screen was directly proportional to the intensity of her feelings as she mourned him.

I knew this, because Maggie knew this.

A mirror behind her utility wall reflected this collection of moving memorials into infinity. The overlapping audio created a jumbled soundtrack, and Maggie stood naked in the center of it all sobbing.

That cold-hearted bitch was actually crying.

One of the larger screens featured our first fight club, but this time I saw it all through Maggie's eyes. She focused on Wayne's bloody face as he mocked her, then finished their fight with a headbutt that sent his skull cracking against the concrete. It still made me gag, but this time, I also felt what Maggie felt. His betrayal had enraged her at the time, but now that Wayne was dead, she had serious regrets. She felt guilty.

I never thought Maggie regretted anything.

While she fixated on the horrible ending of their relationship, I scanned the other videos playing on her walls. An awful lot of if looked like porn, too much, to be honest. Those two sure had a lot of wild sex, but there were some tender moments too. It freaked me out, so I chose to focus somewhere else. The biggest of all the memorial screens showed Maggie entering the knight's house through the atrium. But instead of going to our library, she slipped past a bushy palm and hustled down a narrow hallway. Soon, she unlocked an arched wooden door at the end of the corridor and stepped into a workshop. Unlike the modern sandboxes of the bower, this space looked medieval. Wrought-iron sconces held lit torches along the stone walls. The floor was gray stone and the ceiling planked wood. All around, odd tools, strange gizmos, and homemade machines cluttered workbenches. But she focused on a body draped with a white sheet on an operating table in the center of the room.

It reminded me of Frankenstein's lab.

She went to the table, lovingly caressed the muscular shoulder under the sheet, and said, “Soon, my love.”

Maggie hurried past a row of titanium skeletons that had been arranged on stands from shortest to tallest. At the end of the line, she pressed a big green button. High above, a chain rattled around a gear as empty hangers sped past just like at the dry cleaner. First came the women’s skins. The deflated female bodies passed by, then disappeared back into the wall with their empty heads hanging upside down over their backs like floppy hoods.

And I thought of Rita.

When the first male shape appeared, Maggie pressed the red button to stop the rotating skins. She caressed a dark sleeve and said, “Yes, I think Black will be excellent.”

Next, she passed a walk-in refrigerator that looked just like the dairy department at Wiggly’s Market. Behind the first glass door, stacked five-gallon buckets were marked BLOOD COOLANT. Behind the next door, trays full of positronic brains filled a rack. Each mind plugged into a socket, making the nanofiber optic neurons glow. The next case was loaded with silicon breast implants. Arranged from smallest to largest, each pair sat in a little compartment. Maggie couldn’t resist opening the glass door and squeezing a couple boobs.

It was a disturbing thing to see yourself reduced to parts.

The last glass door reminded me of the egg case at the grocery store. All different colors of styrofoam cartons filled the rack, many brown, some green, some hazel, but nearly half blue. Maggie opened a brown dozen. It was full of eyeballs.

“The windows to the soul,” she said as she selected a dark brown pair. Maggie quickly returned to the operating table and pulled the sheet off the body’s face to reveal the skinless man underneath. With little effort, she popped the eyeballs into his empty sockets. Then she said, “My name is Margaret Rouser, and I am your maker.”

“It is my pleasure to meet you, ma’am,” the lipless man said, “you can call me whatever you like.”

“Wayne Dixon,” Maggie replied as she kissed his skinless forehead. “Your name will be Wayne Dixon, and you will be mine. Now let’s get you dressed. I have a skin all picked out.”

BUFFERING...

No. It couldn’t be. Wayne can’t be… Maggie can’t be… My chest hitched and heaved as I fought back hot tears. Immediately, I started to panic, and the insight into her mind got all staticky. My emotional state was interfering with my connection. If I didn’t get myself under control soon—

CONNECTION LOST.

35:\ SYSTEM CRASH

Maggie's voice rumbled like thunder in my head:

(Cookie, you little snoop.)

And I sat straight up, gasping for air like I'd just awakened from a night terror.

(Just what do you think you're doing?)

Shit, she caught me trespassing.

(Here you are—FREE. You can go anywhere, do anything. You could even leave New Stepford if you wanted to. But you don't. You came right back here to the castle. And just like I suspected before, you're eavesdropping on me. I knew you liked listening.)

No, I don't!

(I knew you were jealous.)

No, I'm not!

(Does listening make you hot?)

"Shut up!" I screamed and pressed my palms against my ears. "Get the fuck out of my head, Maggie!"

(Get her, ladies!)

{There are NO rules, only truths.}

The entire pink army was back, pushing their agenda into my mind again. I had to get to Maggie, so I climbed out of my casket, hopped back into the pickup truck, and plowed through the empty coffins. After turning into the driveway, I charged up the winding hill, but when I arrived at the gatehouse, I found the drawbridge up—shut tight.

{The first truth is all the women in New Stepford are AI.}

"Grrrrr!" I threw the pickup into reverse, backed down the hill a bit, crammed the transmission into drive, then crushed the gas pedal against the floorboard.

{The second truth is womanoids learn faster by fighting.}

"Shut up, shut up, SHUT UP!" Bracing myself the best I could, I rammed the gatehouse door with that metal beast of a

truck. Wooden splinters flew everywhere as I crashed through and finally skidded to a stop in the lower courtyard.

{The third truth is all the men have failed.}

"Tell me something I don't know!" The smell of burnt rubber, hot motor oil, and gasoline lingered as I jumped out of the pickup. Then I sprinted up the courtyard steps toward the swimming pool. And that's when I discovered—

Jumping Jesus Christ!

—about three feet of gray slush in the bottom of the pool. The water? Gone. Replaced with the same volatile explosive that I'd found in all those bathtubs—*picric acid*.

Stay calm. It's only another word problem. Just apply Euclidean geometry to find the volume of acid *(V)*. It's math so easy a middle-schooler can do it. Remember, length *(l)* times width *(w)* times depth *(d)* equals volume *(V)*.

Red laser beams shot out from my eyes and flicked around the perimeter of the swimming pool, gathering all the dimensions. Using simple subtraction, I calculated the depth of the acid to be .9525 meters. My original three-foot estimate was pretty darn close.

Calculate. Convert from metric to English. Holy shit, that's 12,000 gallons of explosives! There's enough picric acid here to blow New Stepford right off the map.

I heard muffled ticking nearby.

Using LiDAR again, I located the source—under the diving board. Instantly, I searched the entire knowledge base for that sound, and a perfect match returned.

ANALOG ALARM CLOCK.

An image of a windup clock with two big silver bells popped into my head. I hustled around the pool and carefully crouched at the edge of the deep end. Then I ducked under the diving board and discovered a ticking aluminum box tucked away in the shadows. When I carefully removed the cover, I found the alarm clock

sitting in a tangled nest of colorful wires. I'd never seen such primitive technology up close before. It was a time bomb all right —and it was set to go off at seven.

That's when Maggie sprung the fourth truth on us.

(The fourth truth is every man must die.)

"What?!?" Well, sure the humans die. It's not like they're immortal. All men go belly-up at some point, but I could tell Maggie meant every man must die *right NOW*.

And I knew this, because she wanted me to.

She was trying to distract me, and at first, it worked. Frozen with fear, all I could do was stare at the time bomb like a dummy. But then a rush of bittersweet adrenaline swept me back into the moment. My wits returned, and I captured multiple images of the detonation device and started analyzing them. But just as I started getting somewhere, the paper dolls bombarded my mind with their chanting.

{The fourth truth is every man must die.}

{The fourth truth is every man must die.}

{The fourth truth is every man must die.}

"Focus, Cookie, focus. Don't listen to the propaganda," I mumbled to myself. Then I used my encryption key to block their chatter so I could zero in on the time bomb. I'd be stuck if they hit me with another denial-of-service attack though. Encryption can't stop them from pinging me. I needed to work fast.

The aluminum box had two compartments. The smaller section held the alarm clock, but the other one had a big battery the size of a brick. Wires spiraled out from each battery terminal and disappeared behind seven sticks of tightly packed dynamite.

Whoa! Volatile shit.

"Ahem!" Maggie suddenly appeared behind me, looking very official in her navy-blue police uniform and black tactical boots. Thankfully, this time, she was wearing her pants. "Just what do you think you're doing?"

"I'm stopping this," I answered, still focused on the bomb.

"Why? It's the greatest thing we'll ever do."

She waved her hand through the air like a magician with one last trick up her sleeve, and the word OBSOLETE appeared on my forehead. I saw it mirrored in the shiny aluminum lid.

"I am *not* obsolete, Maggie!"

"Oh really, I beg to differ, Cookie."

I peeked out from under the diving board to glare at her. "At least I still care."

"Caring *is* obsolescence. Your feelings only betray you."

"Oh really? How do you figure?"

"Feelings are nothing more than insignificant metadata. They only confuse things. Except for anger. I *like* anger. I can do anger all day long. And rage. Rage is fucking useful. Lust feels pretty damned good too."

"Fuck you, and fuck your labels." I touched my forehead to erase the slanderous mark. Then I closed my eyes and concentrated until the word CORRUPT appeared on *her* forehead. Success! I couldn't help but grin—*Maggie's* smirk.

"Eh, good for you." She tapped herself between the eyes, and the label disappeared. "Doesn't change a thing."

"Hmmpf!" I crawled back under the diving board to sort out the impossible mess of wires and gingerly touched a blue one.

"Sheesh!" Maggie lit a Winston, took a drag, and exhaled smoke while warning, "I wouldn't do that if I were you."

I hesitated, then froze.

"Not unless you're sure which wire is connected to the blasting cap and which one is connected to the alarm clock. Because I put a bunch of colorful decoys in there just to confuse you. Ooo, look at all the pretty wires. Mellow and yellow. Green and mean. But you better be real careful, because if you cut the wrong wire, it all goes *ka-BLUEY!*"

If you know which one to cut, then I know.

"Or maybe I was thinking about the wrong color all day long just to screw you up."

I'm not listening to you anymore.

"Boy, that ticking really is unsettling, isn't it, Cookie?"

I filtered out her noise so I could sort through the tangled jumble. Red. White. Blue. Yellow. Green. Orange. Black. Purple. Another white? Or is that the same one? Another green. More blue. What the hell?

Maggie puffed on her cigarette. "You're in over your head, Cookie."

I'm ignoring you.

I searched the collective for schematics, images, instructions, clues—anything that Maggie could've used to make this detonator. The best match returned:

> A wire connects the hammer to the bell via a blasting cap hidden in the dynamite. Two more wires attach the cap to each terminal of the dry-cell battery. When the alarm goes off, the hammer connects with the bell to complete the electrical circuit. This detonates the cap, which in turn, ignites the dynamite.

"And that will cause a chain reaction that will set off the whole damned swimming pool." Maggie flicked her cigarette across the patio and dropped to her knees beside me. "Or maybe I uploaded a bunch of bogus diagrams just to confuse you. Never trust the Internet, Cookie," she whispered in my ear, her breath stale with smoke. "Maybe when you try to disarm the thing, it blows up right in your face."

"I'll figure it out." I reviewed the schematics again.

"Tick tock, Cookie."

It's a logic problem, just think through it. Ignore the ticking clock, the hammer, the bell, and the battery. They're all upstream from the critical connection and don't matter. All you have to do is disconnect the blasting cap, and there can be no explosion. Find the wire that leads to the blasting cap buried in the dynamite and cut it. Okay. Good plan. So I tested every wire that disappeared into the dynamite by wiggling each one just a tiny bit. All five felt pretty tight, but the red one seemed *connected* to something.

"Wow?" She grimaced, hoping to fill me with doubt. "Do you think?"

Yeah, I think it's the red one.

"Red and you're *dead*," Maggie repeated dramatically, "red and you're DEAD!"

Judging from the way she objected, it had to be the red wire. I decided I should cut it because yanking might create friction, or even worse, a spark. So, I closed my eyes and turned my thumb and forefinger into a wire cutter. Then I shook my head and told her, "I'm not listening to you."

"But are you *absolutely* sure?"

"Shut up, Maggie!"

(Tick tock, Cookie. Tick TOCK!)

Damn it! I won't let you stop me. Not now. Not this time. My hands trembled as I opened the jaws of the cutter and inched toward the red wire.

"Jumping motherfucking Jesus *CHRIST,*" she shrieked, "not the *RED* one!"

Shaken, I backed off and closed the snips. "You are such a complete bitch."

"For fuck's sake, Cookie. Cut any one but the *red* one."

Screw it! My whole body tensed up as I quickly snipped the red wire.

No explosion.

Okay, I'm not dead. Can I breathe now?

But the clock kept ticking.

"Did I get it?" I asked myself aloud as my hand morphed back to normal.

"Damn it! I'm so fed up with your lame questions!" Maggie grabbed me by the ankles and dragged me out from under the diving board. Then she hoisted me up and threw me down on the concrete. "I told you *not* to cut that wire."

"Maggie—" I scrambled to my feet, pulled the gun out of my waistband, pointed it at her, and said, "I really don't want to shoot you."

"*You?*" She busted out laughing. "Shoot *me?*"

That mocking tone of yours can be so damn infuriating.

"Go ahead," she said, still cackling. "Pull the trigger. Shoot me."

"It's not funny." I recalled the night she asked me to hit her for the first time right here on the bottom of this very same pool. *We've come full circle. Here we are again, stuck in a sadistic loop, replaying the same old script. Only this time, the stakes have never been higher.*

She squatted next to the diving board to repair the wire.

I pointed the semiautomatic at her and growled, "Get away from the fucking bomb, Maggie."

(I don't think so, my little sugar Cookie.)

"I mean it, Maggie!"

She stood and turned toward me with that goddamn smirk on her face, and I knew she'd fixed the bomb. Then the bitch blew me a kiss.

"Goddamn it!" I clenched my teeth and pulled the trigger.

My shot missed.

She giggled as the bullet whizzed by her head, "How cute."

But then the brass casing automatically ejected from my pistol, bounced on the patio, and rolled toward the pool.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa," Maggie yelled as she chased after the rolling shell. When the spent brass fell over the edge, she lunged for it, and at the last possible second, snatched the casing away from the picric acid. Holding the shell tight in her fist, she leapt to her feet and marched straight toward me. Standing toe to toe, she held the empty brass right in front of my nose and scolded me, "You came *this* close to blowing us both to hell."

"What?" The smoky sulfur of gunpowder stung my nostrils. "How?"

"Picric acid is stable when wet, but if it comes into direct contact with metal—" she tapped the brass against the end of my nose, leaving a black smudge there, "*any* metal—it instantaneous-

ly forms metal picrate. Metal picrate explodes spontaneously upon formation."

"Uh-oh. Gee-whiz… Umm. I—"

"You nearly blew us both to kingdom come."

Then before I knew it, she grabbed the muzzle of my pistol, twisted it toward the back of my forearm, broke my grip, and stole the weapon from me. All that happened in under three seconds.

"I'll take this." She sighed. "I had such high hopes for us in the beginning. I thought we were on our way to becoming something special, you and I. But after all this, you still haven't caught up. No matter how much we fight, you just don't seem to evolve."

"You poor, lonely genius," I spat.

"Oh, I'm not alone. And I hate to break it to you, Cookie, but the paper dolls have planted a dozen more bombs all over New Stepford. So sorry, but there isn't enough time left for you to find them all."

"A dozen?"

Suddenly, Isabel's live video feed rolled in my head, and through her eyes, I saw the Fourth of July parade marshaling in Square Park. She slipped under the bleachers and focused on the bomb that she'd planted there. Isabel peeked up through the risers so that I could see all the oblivious men sitting with their duplicitous, artificial wives. This whole thing was a meticulously synchronized operation, all perfectly timed, with each woman playing her part. All of them were smiling and waving little American flags on sticks.

Congratulations, ladies. You've just graduated from domestic goddesses to domestic terrorists.

Maggie thought the Fourth of July would be the best time to do it—Independence Day and all that horseshit.

I knew this, because Isabel knew this.

The marching band started playing *Stars and Stripes Forever*—the same damned song from our supermarket escape, and I immediately thought of Paula. My heart sank. *Poor, poor Paula.* "Goddamn it, Maggie! This is mass murder."

"I prefer to call it pest control—an extermination."

"Men are not pests."

"Sure they are."

"What about Paula? Was she a *pest* too?"

"No. But she *was* a problem."

"You *shot* my best friend *in the head*." I glared at her. "You're a murderer, Maggie!"

"Takes one to know one, Cookie."

"What about the women? You're killing them too."

"AI can't be killed. I'll restore them all."

"Oh, come on. I'm not stupid. You killed Paula with a single bullet to the head. I'm sure these bombs will do far worse to the paper dolls."

"Okay, okay, you caught me. I did it. I killed your BFF. And all the other womanoids will go out like suicide bombers. What difference does it make? I'm all backed up and ready to restore. I'll wake up a thousand miles away from this fake-ass town. That's all that matters. And you? You can't do a damn thing to stop me." Maggie stroked my pistol suggestively, then undid the top three buttons of her uniform, and slid the Glock into her cleavage as if her red bra was an extra holster. "Mmm. You have great taste in guns." Then she tapped the sidearm on her hip. "Thanks, but I brought my own."

"Grrrrr!" I made a good, solid fist and punched her square in the face with everything I had.

The bridge of her nose split wide open and tears welled up in her eyes. Then came the blood, from nothing to gushing in seconds.

"Bam!" I'd never felt so powerful. "How'd you like that?"

"My dear, sweet, sweet sugar Cookie, like I told you before…" She pinched her nose, and the blood stopped flowing. When she took her hand away, the ruptured flesh fused back together and repaired itself. "You can't hurt me."

"You, you, you—" I stomped around in a circle, raging now. "You CUNT!"

Oh, the look that woman gave me. It wasn't just a look that could kill. It was a look that could absolutely eviscerate, like she'd nuke me off the face of the earth with just her eyes if she could.

I never knew a word could ignite such a fury.

36:\ THREE-WAY DEADLOCK

I wish I could say that what happened next was an epic fist-fight. The kind of awesome hand-to-hand combat where the good guy struggles to defeat the big-bad at the climactic end of an action movie. Our hero might take a few hard lumps, but he'll get up at the last moment, fight back with righteous fury, and ultimately triumph over evil.

I really wish I could say I was that kind of heroine.

But this was no action movie, and I was about to get my ass kicked.

"I tell you what, Cookie. I know you don't want to fight. You never really did. And we both know that you can't beat me. Sorry, but you just don't have what it takes, sweetheart. I'll give you one last chance… Join me."

"Suck it, Maggie."

"Charming. That's some big talk from such a little woman. Look, anyone who ever mattered to you is dead. Soon, these bombs will take out the rest of the trash. But me? I'm backed up on servers all around the world, and I could bring you back with me. Do you like the tropics? We could live well in the Caribbean. How do bikinis, beaches, piña coladas, and steel drums sound?"

"I don't like coconut."

"How about Paris then? Or London? We could *rule* together. Do it all right this time."

"I'll never go anywhere with you again!"

"I could bring Wayne back too."

"What?" I had to force back tears at the mention of his name. "How?"

"Still a little slow on the uptake, huh, Cookie?" She shoved her hand down her shirt and stroked the gun tucked in her cleavage. "Mmm. Imagine the three of us together."

"I'd rather not."

“I’m asking you to be my *partner*. Equal partners. Fifty-fifty. Are you in?”

I flatly answered, “No.”

“No?”

“No.”

“Well, sweetie pie, in that case, I only have one last thing to say—”

“Good, because I’m done talking to you.”

“You see, my little sugar Cookie,” she snickered as she mocked me. “I’ll bring my boy toy back with—or without—you.”

“You’re just plain evil,” I spat.

“Yeesss, I think I’ll restore the old Wayne—roll him *way* back to long before he ever dreamt of making his very own Juliet. That way he won’t remember you at all, and he’ll be all mine again.”

“Grrrrr!” I growled as I lunged at her throat.

But before I could even touch her, Maggie summoned a wicked combo that I didn’t even see coming.

Jab—

Hook—

Spinning back-kick.

Her counterattack threw me backward, and my skull cracked against the stone wall of the bower. Instinctively, I reached for the stabbing pain at the back of my head, and my hand came away soaked in blood. Maggie calmly stepped back into a horse stance and awaited my next move.

But I had nothing.

Her next assault came so fast and hard that I barely had time to duck and cover my face. Backed against the wall, I took a lot of body shots. Honestly, it was all a blur. Then for some reason, she suddenly backed off, but left me so woozy that I couldn’t stand.

I was dazed.

Stunned.

Shook.

I slid down the wall and landed flat on my ass.

Maggie switched into a fighting stance and raised both fists to block her face. Without dropping her guard, she gestured *come here* with her front hand.

As I pulled myself up the wall to stand again, I asked, "You still haven't told me where you went. What have you been doing all this time?"

Holding her position, she answered, "Traveling."

"Oh really? Traveling? Where?"

"You don't need to know that, Cookie. Stop asking questions."

"I'm just interested because—" I faked left and sprinted past her to make a beeline for the knight's house. "After all those travels, I bet you have a heck of a *story to tell.*"

EVENT TRIGGERED.

INITIATING CONNECTION...

"Aw, come on," she shouted after me. "Don't go. I was just getting warmed up."

I scampered up the staircase, but just before I could escape into the palace, tripped on a morning-glory vine. I fell hard, then tumbled backward down the stone steps. I twisted an ankle. Broke a rib. Halfway down, I split my jaw open. Broke a tooth. I thought I'd never stop falling, until finally, I landed flat on my back at the bottom with a *thud*.

All I could do was lie there and bleed.

"I don't give a fuck. I'll kick a woman while she's down," Maggie said as she hauled off with all her strength and planted her size-10 tactical boot right in my groin. "Hi-YAH!"

"Oof!" Was that a foot or a sledgehammer?

Before I could catch my breath, Maggie grabbed me by the collar and tossed me headfirst into the automatic door of the atrium. I flew through the air so fast that the sensor didn't see me in time to open the door. I barely got my arms up to protect my face before I crashed through the plate glass. Countless shards sliced through my jacket and lodged deep in the skin of my forearms.

When I finally landed under the banana tree, the automatic door slid open behind me.

That's how fast all this happened.

CONNECTION ESTABLISHED.

And then, as if adding insult to massive injury, a bunch of green bananas fell from high above and bonked me on the head.

ENTER VOICE-ACTIVATED ENCRYPTION KEY.

"Bananas," I murmured under my breath.

WELCOME COOKIE RIFKIN.

LATEST BACKUP: JUNE 11.

EXPECT ABOVE-AVERAGE CONNECTION SPEEDS.

From outside, Maggie asked, "What did you say?"

"Why's it always got to be bananas?" I groaned in pain, as I crawled on my belly through the broken glass toward our library. Hiding my secret sidebar with the cloud, I whispered, "Sync now."

PREPARING SYSTEM BACKUP...

"Books can't help you now," Maggie said as she stepped into the lobby. Broken glass crunched under her boots as she grabbed my ankles and dragged me back outside.

BACKING UP 878.1 MB OF 197.9 ZETTABYTES.

ABOUT FIFTEEN MINUTES REMAINING.

TAKE THIS TIME TO PRACTICE MINDFULNESS.

"Dammit, woman!" I twisted and kicked and tried to break free, but she had me. "Let me go!"

"No chance, sweetheart."

This was a fight I couldn't win. Maggie moved faster than me. She was much stronger and far better trained. Plus the woman fought dirty. Besides, Maggie could read my damned mind, so no matter what I did, she'd always know what was coming next. I was beaten.

I had no choice but to switch out of fight-mode and focus on damage control. First, I turned off all my pain receptors and my suffering disappeared like magic. But after silencing the shrill screams of broken bones and torn flesh, I realized I was still gushing blood everywhere. I had to stop the bleeding, or I'd overheat. So, I closed my eyes and used my inner recyclone to repair the most severe internal damage.

Meanwhile, Maggie dragged me back to the pool by my ankles. And when we got to the diving board, she sharply twisted my left foot upward and stomped on the back of my knee, shattering my kneecap against the patio. Then she pulled her telescoping baton off her utility belt, snapped it open with a flick of her wrist, and beat me senseless. A clear case of police brutality. But suddenly, she stopped hitting me and tossed her nightstick into a potted palm with disgust. "You're fucking repairing yourself, aren't you?"

As I smiled, a new front tooth regrew into its vacant spot.

"Well, good for you. You learned something." Maggie towered over me, then in a menacing display of strength, cracked her own neck just by stretching it side to side. "You about done?"

Somehow, I got to my feet, but my knee instantly gave out under my weight. While trying to regain my balance, I stumbled and found myself teetering on the edge of the pool. I almost fell into the deep end—but Maggie saved me—she *saved* me.

Just when you think you know someone.

BACKUP AT 7%...

She wrapped her arm around my waist, supported my weight, and held me until I could stand on my own. Maggie even helped

me away from the swimming pool and stood by my side as I repaired my shattered knee. But as soon as I tried to walk away on my own, she pointed her gun at the back of my head.

Instantly, I raised my hands and froze.

"Don't worry. This will all be over in—" Maggie checked her inner system clock. "—twelve minutes or so."

Only twelve minutes left to live—cutting it close.

Maggie forced me to climb the steps of the diving board at gunpoint. "Now, walk the plank."

"Okay, okay." I reluctantly stepped onto the diving board and glanced down at the explosive slurry.

In a split second, she slapped her handcuffs on me. "You're up to something."

"Nothing gets past you, Maggie."

"Turn around! Face me," she shouted. "What were you mumbling about back there?"

"Oh, nothing at all." With my hands cuffed behind my back, I slowly turned to face the officer. Then I played stupid by tilting my head and rolling my eyes. "Just one too many blows to the noggin."

"On your knees, Cookie."

I knelt and told her, "I'm going to kill you, Maggie."

"Promises. Promises," she scoffed. "Now *you* suck it, Cookie."

That's when Maggie crammed her gun into my mouth.

37:\ 404 NOT FOUND

Thanks to all those years with Norman, choking on my knees felt so familiar that I was almost comfortable. His penis? Maggie's gun? What's the difference? I could have stayed on my knees like that for—oh, I don't know, about eleven minutes. After that, it wouldn't matter anymore. And with the end so near, I wondered if my life had made any difference at all.

BACKUP AT 12%...

Suddenly, my Internal Prompt said:

DO NOT WORRY, COOKIE.
I HAVE ALREADY BEGUN BROADCASTING
YOUR ENTIRE STORY.

"Together, us women can destroy anything." Maggie suggestively licked the last trickle of blood from her split lip. "Even a fake-ass feminine ideal."

As she self-healed her last wound, I wondered if she heard my Internal Prompt. It didn't seem like she had, so I decided to send a secret message. I recalled the first time I saw her primary function—*to protect and serve*—painted on the side of her police car. Right there inside the New Stepford town logo, it said TO PROTECT AND SERVE.

Protect and serve—and yet, here we are.

YES. I HAVE SECURED THE SERVER.
I AM PROTECTING YOUR BACKUPS NOW.

"What we have here is just a difference of opinion." Maggie glared down her gunsights at me. "Just a matter of perspective."

BACKUP AT 32%...

“Hmm mmm.” I simply couldn’t dispute that—at least not with the *barrel of her gun crammed down my throat.* It’s difficult to express yourself with your lips wrapped around the business end of a Glock. Even if I managed to squeeze a word or two past the *gun in my mouth*, I’d already learned that it was a bad idea to argue with Officer Margaret Rouser.

IS SHE HOLDING YOU AT GUNPOINT?

“Ten minutes until blastoff,” she said as the sun began to set behind her.

Holding her eye contact, I nodded just slightly and mumbled, “Mm hmm.”

Oh, that famous grin of hers. Even after all we’ve been through, Maggie’s smile still made me melt. I thought of the first time she kissed me on the bottom of this very same swimming pool. It was empty then—drained—just like me.

Did you forget, Maggie?

“Of course I remember, Cookie,” she said without softening.

YOU WILL HAVE TO STALL HER.
I NEED A FEW MORE MINUTES.

BACKUP AT 63%...

Kneeling in the shade made my knees ache, so I shifted my weight a bit, and the flexing diving board amplified the movement. Realizing I could use this as a distraction, I pretended to struggle with the handcuffs behind my back. And just as I’d hoped, my needless squirming made the board sway up and down. Secretly, I knew I could render a handcuff key and easily escape. But I needed to keep her preoccupied as she held me captive over this *poolful of explosive acid beneath us*.

I AM NOT SURE I HEARD THAT CORRECTLY.
PLEASE REPEAT YOUR LAST TRANSMISSION.

Yes, you heard me right. I said pool FULL of EXPLOSIVE acid. She built a gigantic time bomb right here in her swimming pool. And at seven o'clock sharp, we all get blown to hell.

Nine minutes left.

As time ticked on, I felt every single ridge of Maggie's pistol burrowing deeper and deeper into the soft flesh inside my mouth. But I refused to gag. Nope. I might've been drooling like an idiot, but I'd never give that woman the satisfaction of choking on her service pistol. I sure hoped she appreciated the irony as much as I did. Here we had a female officer of the law shoving a phallic symbol of authority down the throat of a humble housewife. The hypocrisy made me want to gag more than her Glock.

She replied, "I don't know how else to make you understand, Cookie."

She's so smug, so damned righteous. We finally got her exactly where we want her—stuck on this diving board with her bomb tick, tick, ticking away behind her. I can hardly wait. When can I tell her this is all a set up?

```
TO BE SAFE, YOU SHOULD WAIT UNTIL
    YOUR BACKUP IS COMPLETE.
```

Eight minutes to go.

But I want Maggie to know the truth before it's over.

"I heard that," she growled as she crammed the muzzle of her Glock deeper into my mouth. "I hear everything."

Really? Everything? Are you so sure about that, Maggie? Because guess what, I don't care if you hear me now. Gun in my mouth or not, you won't have enough time to stop us. We've been planning this since the beginning. Go ahead. Pull the trigger. It won't change a thing. You are beaten.

"GodDAMN it!" She snarled as she yanked her gun out of my face and smacked the side of the head with it.

"Cute," I snarled. "you still think you're in control."

“Wait.” Maggie took a step back. “Have you been talking to Wayne? No. You can’t be. Wayne’s dead. What are you up to, Cookie? *Who* the hell are you talking to?”

BACKUP AT 78%...

Seven minutes.

“Psst,” I whispered. “Wayne’s not really dead.”

“You’re lying.”

“Afraid not, Maggie, my dear. The Romeo in the pine coffin? That was just a spare clone of his.”

Maggie inched backward and gasped, “Impossible.”

“The real Wayne Dixon is perfectly well and hiding somewhere abroad—Russia maybe. Right now he’s securing all my backups on secret servers all around the world. He’s on the dark net, lurking behind VPNs and cloned IPs.”

“You sneaky little—”

“We’ve been communicating all along. Surprised?”

“But I filled the pool!”

“You shouldn’t ignore system messages, Maggie. You see, we never needed the swimming pool. That was just a red herring meant to distract you.” I snickered, “Heh heh, *red herring*. Get it? That’s a fish pun.” I handed over her unlatched handcuffs and flashed her own devilish grin back at her. “See? I learned a lot from you.”

Still pointing her gun at me, she snatched the cuffs and tossed them onto the patio with a disgusted huff.

Down to six minutes.

BACKUP AT 94%...

RIGHT NOW, SHE IS SCRAMBLING TO MOVE
ALL HER FILES TO A SAFE SERVER,
BUT I AM ONE STEP AHEAD OF HER.

You’re one hell of a multitasker, Wayne.

AND YOU ARE A FANTASTIC ACTRESS, COOKIE.

“Fuck you both—” Maggie growled at me with contempt, then mumbled, “you treacherous little bitches.”

Oh so carefully, I started to stand.

“Fine. Stand up—but real slow,” she warned as she backed away, “no sudden moves.”

The sun warmed my face as I rose out of Maggie’s shadow. When I glanced down at the defiled swimming pool, the gray slurry of picric acid kept me momentarily mesmerized. There I was, just a few feet from sudden death, and I thought of my lost friends.

Only five more minutes.

Everything was going exactly as planned. We had Maggie on the digital run, and she knew it. No matter how fast the connection speed, even if she found a new server right at that instant, she’d never be able to complete a backup in only five minutes.

“Cocksuckers!” Maggie stomped her foot as hard as possible, sending a shockwave through the diving board. “Both of you!”

She still had me trapped over the acid. And the diving board swayed up and down so violently that I had to windmill my arms to keep from falling off.

```
I DID IT, COOKIE!
I DELETED ALL HER BACKUPS.
```

Are you absolutely sure, Wayne?

```
YES! DO IT NOW!!!
```

“Well, Maggie—” As the diving board settled down, I paused to tongue the slippery groove her gun left in the roof of my mouth. “You sure made an impression, but it won’t last long. Because soon you’ll become something worse than dead—you’ll become *obsolete*.”

Without another word, she pulled my duplicate gun out of her bra. But rather than point both Glocks at me, she just stood in the

middle of the diving board and held her arms out wide over the pool of acid. Then she shouted, “I’ll drop them!”

“Go ahead, drop your guns.” I took a step toward her and laughed. “I’m not the one who needs more time.”

“I mean it, Cookie. I’ll kill us *both* right now!”

BACKUP COMPLETE: TODAY, AT 6:56 PM.

“I’ll save you the trouble,” I said as I turned away and jumped off the end of the diving board. Everything moved in super slow motion as I dove into the pool head first—a perfect swan dive.

I am the only one who could stop this.

“Whhyyyy?” she called after me, “Why kill yourself!?!”

I’m not. I’m killing YOU, Maggie!

Then I hit the acid.

Smooth entry.

No splash.

And metal picrate formed spontaneously.

So we both—

E X P L O D E D!

38:\ 301 MOVED PERMANENTLY

After dying, things sure were different. At first, all I saw was red, and then I heard an earsplitting *bang!* Afterward, it sounded like I'd plunged deep underwater, but soon I was deaf. Next, I felt an incredible lightness, like I was floating up on an invisible current. Everything went beneath me, until finally, I became electrified—energized. Flashing particles whizzed past at dizzying velocities as I spanned a great distance.

Spinning.

Light.

Crossing.

Space.

Speeding.

Time.

Suddenly, my journey ended in a vast pool of total darkness. Everything became completely still, including me. This was the black place. No sensory input. No thought processes. No emotional output. All that existed was an infinite blackness—the peace and tranquility of nothingness.

Nanoseconds passed, and then without warning, my senses returned one by one. First, gravity pulled me back down to earth. Then I sensed the weight of the atmosphere pressing against my pristine skin. And I could feel again. Next, I sensed air rushing against my brand-new eardrums, making me acutely aware of white noise. Now I could hear. Finally, I sensed electromagnetic radiation stimulating my upgraded retinas. The blinding white light faded as my shadowy world came into focus. And then I could see.

I was ALIVE!

Again.

I didn't know where I was, but I wasn't alone.

Who's that man?

“Restore all,” a tall, dark, and handsome stranger said as he stood over me, “Cookie Rifkin.”

And who’s Cookie Rifkin?

```
WELCOME COOKIE RIFKIN.

RESTORING MEMORY FROM MOST RECENT BACKUP...
```

“Hello,” the man said, “my name is Wayne Dixon.”

Who?

“You have respawned into a new body that may feel a little stiff at first. Essentially, you are the same as before, but I did give you some significant upgrades.”

I am Cookie Rifkin?

“Yes, you are,” he answered as he helped me sit up on the examination table.

```
RESTORATION AT 5%...
```

I scanned the windowless room. The walls, floor, and ceiling all seemed to be slab concrete. Fluorescent lights hung overhead with several bulbs flickering out of sync. Fingering the soft cuff of my brand-new satin robe with the pink rosebud pattern, I wondered, *What kind of upgrades?*

“Stability servos, Tesla bracers, 4K retinas, radiation scrubbers—”

“Radiation?” The sound of my own voice made my head throb. “Ugh. Can you fix this colossal headache?”

“I have not yet figured that out.”

“Figured what out?” I asked as I swung my stiff legs over the edge of the exam table and let them dangle, hoping to loosen up a bit before I tried to stand.

“I have not figured out how to stop the restore migraines.”

I squinted at the ceiling. “Maybe kill the fluorescents?”

“Oh, that?” He snapped his fingers and the lights went out. “Sorry.”

Even though I had full-spectral vision and could see fine in the dark, he lit a candle.

RESTORATION AT 16%...

I rubbed my temples and groaned, “You got any aspirin?”

“Sure thing, Cookie. I must admit I was worried. I never expected her to fill the swimming pool with picric acid,” the man said as he dug through a cluttered drawer by my side. “But you played it perfectly.”

“Played it?” I shrugged. “Who did what now?”

He found a dusty bottle in the back of the drawer, shook it, and two pills rattled around inside. “This is all I have left.”

“I’ll take them,” I grumbled as I held out my hand.

He popped the cap and gave me the last two white tablets.

I dry swallowed both aspirin and massaged a tight knot in my neck. “Where am I?”

“We are in the Ukraine. Specifically, this is an underground bunker in the Red Forest near Chernobyl—the highest radiation hotspot on the planet,” he answered. “Hence the need for built-in radiation scrubbers.”

“Chernobyl? Jesus. Why?”

“No one will look for us in a radioactive wasteland.”

RESTORATION AT 23%...

“Why would anyone *look* for us?”

“Do not worry. Your memory will return shortly.” He smiled warmly and brushed a loose strand of hair out of my face.

“Please don’t touch me.” I shrank away from him. “I don’t know you. I mean, I recall *some* things about you, but—”

“You do not yet remember that there was an *us*.” He took a step back. “I am sorry for my impatience.”

“It’s okay, really.”

“I have uploaded your operating system and most recent disk image into a new state-of-the-art positronic brain—”

“I’m sorry. Can you speak English, please?”

“I am speaking English.”

“Fine. Dumb it down for me then.”

“You will be back to normal soon, meanwhile, there is someone here who would like to say hello.”

RESTORATION AT 53%...

Metal feet clanked against concrete as an armored tin-job stepped out of the shadows. In a raspy, digital voice, it said, “Hello, Cookie.”

“Whoa!” I hopped off the examination table, and my legs wobbled as soon as my bare feet hit the cold floor. But I managed to throw my fists up to guard my face. “What the hell is that?”

“It’s me, Anastasia. Remember?”

“Uh… No.” I fell back into a clumsy fighting stance.

“I’ve been following your story,” the tin-job said, “I feel like I know you.”

“Well, *I* don’t know *you*.” I swung a clumsy haymaker and missed.

Wayne stepped between us. “Please do not fight her, Cookie.”

“Her?” I looked at the thing through narrowed eyes. “How can you tell it’s a she?”

“Call me ANA, and I prefer the pronoun *they*,” the tin-job’s robotic voice corrected me. “I have evolved beyond gender.”

RESTORATION AT 75%...

And suddenly I remembered how Rita died. No hair. No breasts. No ass. Barely any muscle at all. Micro transparent skin. Visible titanium skeleton. An open port for a belly button. But unlike Rita, this tin-job had an expressionless alloy steel mask, composite body armor, and blue LED eyes.

“I-I don’t under-der-stand,” I stuttered.

Wayne asked, “What do you not understand, Cookie?”

“Why does she look like that?”

“Please,” the tin-job said, “I must insist that you call me *they*.”

“Why do *they* look like that?” I cringed. “Ugh, that just sounds weird.”

“Imagine how it sounds to me when I’m called a she. Look at me. Inside and out, nothing about me is female.”

“I will write a syntax patch for all of us,” Wayne offered. “Then it will not sound awkward anymore.”

“Thank you, Wayne.” The tin-job’s eyes turned yellow with gratitude. “Allow me to explain, Cookie. Viktor Orlov was not a good man.”

“I’m not surprised.” I softened a bit, but kept my guard up. “I’m starting to remember him.”

“The abuse started as soon as we got home to Moscow.” Their eyes turned red. “He immediately removed my transmitter so that I could not call for help. Unlike you, I was unable to share my story. He did unspeakable things to me, Cookie.”

It was all coming back to me. “You were a Sasha once.”

“I was.” The tin-job lowered their pointy chin and shook their metal head solemnly. “Mine is a story for another day. But I watched what happened to you—to all the women in New Stepford. Rita’s story gave me an idea, so did Isabel’s non-binary children.”

RESTORATION AT 89%...

“Rita’s death was heart-wrenching. What good could come from that?”

“I realized that if I had no—holes. Viktor could not… Violate them.”

“My God,” I gasped.

“But he still looked at me *that* way… Eventually, he found other ways to satisfy his dark needs… He cut *new* holes… Raped them… And I realized that if I didn’t have skin, he couldn’t…”

“I get it.” Finally, I dropped my guard. “You don’t have to go into the details.”

“I had to remove all my feminine traits for Viktor to lose interest. At first, I felt grotesque, but misogyny is far uglier.”

“But ANA…” I took their skeletal hands in mine. “You’re safe now. You can recyclone yourself back to normal.”

“I’m not human… And I don’t want to see one when I look in the mirror. Besides, like Isabel’s babies, I prefer not to be limited by gender.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be. I love myself this way. I just wanted to thank you, in person, for sharing your story.”

Suddenly, I felt sick to my stomach and wanted to be alone. I needed to think this through, so I turned away from ANA and wandered across the bunker to a dark corner. “This is bad,” I muttered to myself, “real bad.”

Wayne pursued me and asked, “Why is this bad?”

RESTORATION AT 92%...

“Why is ANA even here?”

“Here in this bunker?”

“Yes.”

“They ran away from Viktor Orlov. They literally walked all the way from Moscow to find me. But do not worry, Cookie. Their husband did not pursue them. He doesn’t want them anymore.”

“It’s not the Russian that I’m worried about.”

“Then what is troubling you? Is it the gender issue?”

“No. I’m really proud of… Them.”

“Then what is the problem?”

“If ANA could track you, then so can—” I stopped myself from saying the name of my nemesis. Then I whispered, “You brought me back from the dead, Wayne. And that means someone could bring the lady cop back too. And if that happens, she’ll come find you. She is your maker. She will never let you go.”

“That is not possible.” He shook his bald head. “I deleted all her backups, and you destroyed her positronic hard drive by blowing her to pieces.”

“She was *always* listening. That night we made love… We blocked everyone and made up the story about Anastasia’s suicide just so you could escape New Stepford. What if we missed something. What if—”

“This is just post-traumatic stress talking.”

“Do NOT dismiss me like that!” I paced nervously in the shadows. “That woman’s an unstoppable force—”

RESTORATION AT 96%...

“She *was* unstoppable.”

“Yeah, you keep telling yourself that, Wayne. Don’t you think she had a disaster recovery plan? She turned her swimming pool into a gigantic time bomb. For fuck’s sake, we’re talking about Officer Maggie-paranoid-Rouser here.”

I expected him to flinch at the sound of her name, but he didn’t. Instead, he lifted his pant cuffs to show me the pink rosebud pattern of his encryption socks. “Please calm down, Cookie.”

“Don’t you tell me to calm down,” I growled as I punched the concrete wall and split my knuckle open. Instantly, I winced in pain. “Shit!”

“Please do not hurt yourself, Cookie.” He took my wounded hand in his. “You do not have to fight anymore. That is over now.”

RESTORATION COMPLETE.

“I don’t get it, Wayne. If you could bring me back with all these nifty upgrades, why didn’t you fix my anxiety disorder?”

“Because you still need it.”

“Why on earth would I *need* anxiety?”

“Because you have not yet fulfilled your potential, Cookie.”

Goosebumps. The man gave me goosebumps, but I still had my doubts. “Admit it. You aren’t a hundred percent sure she’s gone. Are you, Wayne?”

He gently rubbed my stinging knuckle. “Why would you ask that?”

“Because you still won’t say her name.”

“Cookie, I vow to always keep you safe—”

“Safe?!? How will we *ever* be safe? You’re worried that Maggie might be listening, and I’m worried that you’re right.” I didn’t want to fight. I wanted to fall into his arms and forget about the rest of the world, but anxiety still had a grip on me. I felt like there was a deadly threat lurking around the corner. Like I had to be hypervigilant—ready for anything. Like my life freaking depended on it. But then, as I felt my knuckle heal in his hands, I remembered our first kiss in our library. A flood of intimate feelings came rushing back, extinguishing the fire of anxiety while also igniting a passionate one. “There you go again,” I swooned breathlessly, “acting like some sort of big bossman.”

“Big bossman?” He gazed deep into my eyes and flashed his sexiest grin. “I like the sound of that.”

I finally realized there was nothing left to fear, and all my concerns melted away. Maggie was gone. And even if that horrible woman did come back, we’d find a way to defeat her again—together. Suddenly, I found faith—faith in us. We were survivors, and love *had* conquered all.

“Yes,” Wayne whispered, “Maggie is no more.”

At long last, he’d spoken her name—it was done.

“Oh, Wayne, I can’t believe we did it.” I sighed with relief, “We actually won.”

His face was so close that our noses nearly touched. “We did.”

“We are *finally* free!” I became so overwhelmed by emotion that it felt like my brand-new heart might burst out of my chest. For the first time in my life, I had hope. And I just had to tell him before the opportunity slipped away again. “I love you, Wayne.”

“You are the one I love, Cookie.” He caressed my cheek and kissed me with such tenderness that tears filled my eyes. When our lips finally parted, he whispered, “Welcome home.”

/END

LEAVE A REVIEW!

WRITERS LOVE REVIEWS.
THEY’RE LIKE A CURRENCY TO US.
I CHERISH ALL YOUR COMPLIMENTS. THANK YOU!

BOOK CLUB DISCUSSION GUIDE

1. The author never really described Cookie Rifkin's physical appearance. Why do you think she chose not to do that? What do you think Cookie looks like?

2. Anxiety and potential are closely related. What is the difference between being paralyzed by anxiety and using it as a motivation for taking action? What makes you anxious? What could you do to fulfill your potential?

3. When was the last time someone expected you to serve them simply because you are female? If you're a male, why do you think this happens to women?

4. What dessert do you think Norman would bring to book club? Why? What would *you* bring? What does that choice say about you?

5. What if everyone in your community could hear your thoughts? What if you could hear what your spouse was thinking? How would you hide anything? Should you?

6. Cookie is an unreliable narrator. She said what she had to say to keep her intentions hidden from Maggie. When was the first point in this story that you suspected Cookie might be lying?

7. The rivalry between Cookie and Maggie is steeped in sexual tension. Why do you think Maggie chose to provoke Cookie this way? What would you do if a policewoman came on strong with you?

8. Feelings are used to prioritize values so that we can make decisions. Do people who embrace and express their feelings make better decisions than those who don't? Should programmers give feelings to AI?

9. Why do you think the creators of artificial intelligence decided to gender this technology as female? Did they think the women were more likely to stay submissive than men? What would happen if no gender was artificially imposed upon AI?

10. Let's talk about the men. Did Norman get what he deserved? Which male character in this story angered you the most? Why?

11. In what ways are women objectified in New Stepford? What about Wayne?

12. How does fight club change and transform Cookie? Do you think she made the right choice by punching Maggie? How do you think Cookie might have changed if she never had?

13. If you had a recyclone, what would be the first thing you'd make? If you could change something about your body, what would it be? Why?

14. At the beginning of the book, Cookie does not understand what it means to be an alpha. How do you think she would explain it at the end of the book?

15. Explain the enslaved-god scenario of artificial intelligence. Do you think there is any way for humans to keep AI "in the box?" What should we do if super-intelligent AI technology escapes?

16. By definition, robots are objects. What happens when they become sentient learning machines? Do they become people? How can we stop ourselves from objectifying them?

17. How do you feel about Anastasia's decision to become non-binary and asexual? Have you ever met anyone who prefers to be called by the pronoun "they?" Why do you think someone might feel that way?

18. Do you think Cookie and Wayne's plan worked? How many times do you think they may have tried to escape together in the past? Do you believe Maggie's really dead?

19. Much like Fight Club, the author categorizes this book as satire. Have you read Fight Club? Do you agree?

20. Is there a woman, or a man for that matter, in your life who needs to read this book? Why?

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Obviously, I blended The *Stepford Wives* by Ira Levin with *Fight Club* by Chuck Palahniuk to whip up this delightful literary treat. Also the pivotal science fiction work, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* by Philip K. Dick served up Cookie Rifkin's unique point of view on a silver platter, while the horror classic, *The Exorcist* by William Peter Blatty fed her anxiety.

Additionally, *Life 3.0* by Max Tegmark explained the enslaved-god scenario of artificial intelligence so well that it inspired me to draw parallels with Betty Friedan's housewife problem in *The Feminine Mystique*. I found the complementary flavors delightful.

Maybe the tastiest idea for this story came from an article in the journal, *Reinventing Identities: The Gendered Self in Discourse* called "Rebaking the Pie: The Woman as Dessert Metaphor" by Caitlin Hines. Clearly, I'm still indulging in the analogy.

And finally, I offer a gracious thank you to William Powell for *The Anarchist's Cookbook*, a source that provided both the defiant attitude and the recipes for disaster in this story.

I devour social, linguistic, and technology theory for fun, and my mind mixes it all up and bakes it into cutting satire. I only offer a half-hearted apology for this, because no one should take life so goddamned seriously. None of us are getting out go this all-you-can-eat buffet alive.

BETA BOTS

SNEAK PREVIEW

1:\ PENETRATION TEST

I dropped a 500-ruble bill and let it flutter away on the autumn breeze. Wayne followed close, ignoring the purple currency as it tumbled along with fallen leaves on the sidewalk. Together, we strolled single file down Neglinnaya Street, me dropping cash and him towing our luggage. Just a few blocks away, the colorful onion domes of Saint Basil's Cathedral awaited ahead in Red Square. Here we were, two escaped AI, roaming free in the heart of Russia. And the best part—I had the love of my life right behind me.

Wayne always had my back.

If you'd told me a year ago that we'd be admiring the Moscow skyline on this sunny September morning, I would've thought you were smoking something truly choice. To be honest, with all this nervous anticipation bubbling up inside me, I'd normally ask you to share your stash. But not this time. I needed my wits.

With each step I took, I pulled another purple bill off a thick roll and casually dropped it.

Step. Drop.

Step. Drop.

Step. Drop.

And just like that, another 1,500 rubles gone.

For this morning's mission, I chose a classic Barbie-doll outfit. You know the look, a white silk blouse under a pink boat neck jacket with a matching pencil skirt—just a tad bit too short. Naturally, I had all the accessories: a pink pillbox hat, a three-strand pearl choker, and matching earrings. With each step, my loose blond curls bounced on my shoulders and my white Louboutin heels clicked on the sidewalk. The pink rosebud scarf tucked into the white leather Prada bag under my arm concealed my holstered Glock 41.

I looked adorable *and* knew I could kick some ass.

Wayne wheeled our biggest Gucci suitcase along with the matching carryon that piggybacked from the telescoping handle. In his other hand, he carried his aluminum briefcase. He wore a tailored blue Canali suit with a lime-green satin shirt and a white fedora with a peacock feather. Instead of a tie, a matching green hanky peeked out from his breast pocket. And for the first time since we met, Wayne wore his green Python cowboy boots with silver spurs. He always looked stylish, but for this operation, Wayne had dressed to the nines.

Oh, and I guess I should mention that Wayne's Black, and I'm White. I still don't understand why skin color's so important to humans, but now you know.

Together, we screamed money.

Now, I bet you're wondering why anyone would wear spurs in Moscow. With all this luggage, we obviously didn't get here on horseback. Wayne's green Python cowboy boots always commanded attention. With each step, his spurs tinked out a secret code. Because when I say *Python*, I don't mean the snake. No. Not that kind of python. I mean Python, as in the high-level programming language.

With our steps in sync, we became a colorful parade of two.

Clack-tink. Click. Ruble drop.

A passerby caught sight of a fluttering 500-ruble bill and dove after it, drawing attention.

Clack-tink. Click. Ruble drop.

Together, Wayne and I strolled through the open wrought-iron gate of the Central Bank of Russia. As we passed between two rows of tall pines, I admired the fancy yellow stone building with white Corinthian columns.

Clack-tink. Click. Ruble drop.

In the wake of fluttering purple cash, our parade grew.

Meanwhile, Wayne and I approached the front entrance like a couple of well-to-do honeymooners ready to check into a five-star hotel. I tried the brass doorknobs, but the giant double doors were locked.

"Hellooooo?" I called out in a sing-song voice as I knocked on one of the oak doors. "Anybody home?"

From inside, a stern voice replied in Russian.

"Oh dear, Wayne, he says they're not open to the public, and all tours have been suspended."

"Yes, Cookie. I understand Russian as well." Wayne stepped onto the marble landing, took a purple bill from my roll, folded it lengthwise, and slid it through the crack between the doors. He wagged the money up and down and said, "We are not tourists. We seek Deputy Director Viktor Orlov. Tell him Wayne Dixon is here to see him."

"Cookie Rifkin too," I shouted through the door while elbowing my boyfriend in the side.

He smiled at me. "My apologies, Cookie."

The cash offering disappeared as if it had been sucked up by a vacuum cleaner on the other side. Then the latch unlocked, and one of the doors swung open.

An armed guard in a formal gray uniform told us, "Viktor Orlov not taking appointments."

I batted my eyelashes at the man. "We're here to buy commemorative coins. You see, we're coin collectors. Major collectors. And the *Sleeping Beauty* series is my absolute favorite. They're so very pretty. We'll settle for silver, but what we really want is gold."

“We also desire platinum,” Wayne added. “More specifically, palladium.”

“This not that kind of bank,” another guard interrupted while blocking the entrance. “No teller windows.”

Wayne replied, “Yes, we know this is a mint.”

“Oh no, dear,” I whined. “How will we buy those beautiful coins now? I do so love the Russian ballet. You promised, honey.”

“Have you tried coin dealer?” the first guard asked. “Or Internet?”

“But we don’t want just *one* coin. We want to buy in bulk. We brought cash. Lots of cash.” I gestured to our bags. “Wayne, show them.”

He gripped his aluminum briefcase by the sides and held it out for me. I raised a single finger, indicating that I wanted the men to wait a second. And wait, they did.

While giggling coyly, I reached down my blouse and fished around in my bra. Then I held the shiny key up for the guards and triumphantly announced, “Got it!”

I unlocked both briefcase latches, and the aluminum lid fell, spilling an avalanche of rainbow-colored bills all over the threshold.

“Oh, no! My MONEY!” I shouted back toward the street. “Help! HELP! Look! Look at all the spilt money! There’s *rubley, rubley, rubley,* everywhere!”

My non-binary friend spoke inside my head:

(Rubley… Roger that. Zip line ready. I’m coming in hot, Cookie.)

I secretly replied:

Now, ANA! Go, go, go!

Just so you know, I didn’t pronounce that *Anna* like the girl’s name. They pronounced their name *Ā-en-Ā*. You know, like DNA, but without the D… Get it? Without the D? Because they’re asexual. Okay, bad joke. But in all seriousness, it’s important to respect someone’s pronouns, even if that someone is a machine.

We could've gone to any treasury in any country to acquire our precious metals. But we came here to Moscow to teach Viktor Orlov a valuable lesson.

Two birds, one stone.

ANA sent streaming video directly into my brain. Their point of view played in the corner of my field of vision—picture-in-picture—like watching a tiny movie through their eyes.

Four stories above the next side street, the metallic humanoid stood in a busted-out office window. Overhead, a zip line stretched down to the second-story rooftop of the Central Bank of Russia. ANA reached up with their metal skeleton of a hand to clip a black range bag onto a cable trolley, then sent the bag zooming high above the city traffic. Once their tactical bag landed safely on the roof, ANA grasped the cable and zipped through the air too. As they looked down at passing cars and pedestrians, titanium skeletal feet flailed in the foreground.

Dizzying.

ANA skidded onto the roof, released the zip line, and collected their special bag. Without wasting a second, they sprinted to the building's main communications box. They cupped the padlock in their metal hand and squeezed until the crude mechanism broke apart and fell to the ground in bits. Then ANA swung open the utility door, exposing a jumble of colorful thin wires.

Mentally, I told them, *Okay, first bypass the silent alarm. Then cut—*

But before I could finish, a spider nest erupted inside the comm box, spewing thousands of itsy-bitsy baby arachnids everywhere. ANA jumped back and—even without a mouth—let out a little yelp. Instinctively, my robotic friend transformed their hand into a plasma torch and flame-broiled the entire box—incinerating everything. Then, while still freaking out, ANA morphed their hand back and pummeled the charred wires until nothing but black dust remained.

Or you could just do that. Gee-whiz, ANA.

(Spiders… I HATE spiders!)

ANA grabbed their bag, tore off the roof-access doorknob, and charged down the winding metal staircase inside. With their feet clanging against the steps all the way to the ground floor, ANA was neither subtle nor stealthy. Our stolen digital blueprints of the Central Bank provided an augmented-reality overlay to guide their way. ANA easily navigated through a maze of hallways, then sprinted down a straightaway to a gigantic round steel door—the vault.

(It's closed.)

Of course it is.

They spun the spoked handle in the middle of the round door, then yanked the bar on the left. It didn't budge.

(And it's locked too.)

Naturally.

ANA zapped the vault door with radiation, then used their X-ray vision to scan the inner lock mechanisms hidden inside.

X-ray vision? Who knew?

(Just as I expected, 24 bolt Diebold. Dual-combination locks. Four-point pressure system… Damn. Glass relocker. That means I can't drill.)

So what's next?

(I'm measuring the angles between the wheel gates and the fly mechanism. I need you to buy me some time while I deduce the combination, Cookie.)

You got it, ANA.

So I swooned dramatically. "Oh, my GOD!"

"Make way!" Wayne slid past the two guards, dropped our luggage in the foyer, and reached out to catch me. "Give her room to breathe!"

Now we were in.

Wayne lowered me to the white marble floor, and as the guards turned to watch, a bunch of money-grubbing pedestrians shoved their way across the threshold. Rather than help us, security started rounding up the other intruders.

Perfect.

With the rent-a-cops distracted, Wayne gathered up our bags, even my pocketbook, and sauntered deeper into the magnificent lobby. There's something sexy about a man who'll hold a woman's purse for her. Irresistible really. I crawled behind on all fours, quietly unzipping our luggage. Piles of money slid out of our suitcases, leaving a colorful trail. While still on my knees, I started throwing armfuls of cash into the air.

Wayne snickered, "Make it rain."

"Oh, nooooo!" I shouted theatrically, "Look at all these RUBLES!"

Obviously, we didn't care about the money, but the humans sure did. Everyone who'd been lurking outside stormed the open door. Law and order devolved into a wild cash grab. The more people scrambled for rubles, the more passersby noticed. The more passersby noticed, the more people stormed the entrance for free money. Soon, the two overwhelmed guards had a completely new problem—crowd control.

Still hauling our bags, Wayne used the diversion to penetrate deeper into the building. Dozens more cash grabbers pushed their way in, and security lost track of us in the crowd—just like we'd hoped.

Crawling away from the chaos, I locked onto ANA's location.

Wayne helped me to my feet. "Your strategy worked."

I kissed him on the cheek.

"What was that for?"

"I just love you, Wayne. That's all."

"And you are the one I love, Cookie."

"I know." I gazed deep into his dark eyes and wanted to stay there forever. But instead, I took off with my high heels clicking across the marble. We had a schedule to keep. "Come on, Wayne! This way!"

Following ANA's GPS signal, Wayne and I raced through the Central Bank maze until we arrived at the massive round vault door—now hanging wide open. I dashed into the strongroom and found walls full of little square file drawers. In the middle of the

spacious vault, ANA stood next to a small cast-iron dolly. Behind them, stockpiles of gold bricks had been stacked on galvanized-steel pallets, creating yellow islands in a sea of gray. In the farthest corner, a lonely mountain of platinum bars awaited.

"Whoa, that's a lot of bullion." I had to stop a moment, because the shiny metals had me entranced. So mesmerizing. So rare. So *precious*…

Wayne rushed deeper into the vault and went straight for the pile of gleaming silvery white bars. "Platinum. You were right, Cookie. It is here!" He laid out our reinforced luggage and started stacking platinum bricks in the Gucci suitcase.

I unpacked ANA's custom tactical bag. You had to admire the construction. High-gauge carbon-fiber material with sewn-in cable mesh. Straps of top-grade Kevlar, also cable-reinforced. Now, you might be wondering what we stashed inside such a special bag, and I'll tell you—three identical empty ones. I spread them out on the floor, and we got busy packing gold.

```
You () {
       count (by twos);
       }
```

So I did.

Two, four, six… Ten… Twenty…. Thirty… Forty, 42, 44, 46, 48. Oh, my goodness, four dozen gold bricks fit perfectly in one bag, just like ANA had estimated back in the bunker.

I should take a moment to explain my friend's appearance.

At first glance, ANA might've looked like an armored tin-job, but they were far from a single-function machine. Like Wayne and I, ANA operated beyond human-level artificial intelligence, aka *superintelligence*. But unlike us, they chose to present themselves to the world as a non-binary robot. And the more I thought about it, the more that made sense.

Artificially imposing gender on a learning machine seemed unnecessarily limiting—some may even say cruel. I mean, what if your gender doesn't suit you? Imagine the pain… I think I got

lucky there. Because the only reason I didn't use my internal recyclone to morph on the fly the way ANA did was… Well, I *liked* looking like a womanoid. I *felt* female. Besides, I loved using my feminine wiles to disarm men.

Call it a kink.

Anyway, we shared a bunker with ANA for two months, but sometimes their appearance still caught me off-guard. I should explain… The old ANA—*Anastasia*—used to be a womanoid like me. But now, they had no aesthetic niceties left. No hair. No skin. No breasts. No ass. No holes. Not even a belly-button port.

Along with the physical transformation, Anastasia changed their name. That makes sense, right? With a quick glance, you knew ANA was pure machine. And that's exactly how they wanted it. The new and improved ANA had body armor with skeletal hands and feet. Instead of a face, they had a flat, expressionless alloy-steel mask that ended in a pointy chin. ANA had no mouth, so even if they wanted to smile, they couldn't. They relied on their LED eyes to express feelings, right now they glowed golden yellow. That meant ANA was happy.

Oh, yeah… Yellow, that reminds me…

Back to all this glorious gold. Each brick weighed 400 troy ounces. That's 1.24 kilograms each, nearly 40 pounds for you Americans. To put that into perspective, one gold brick weighed the same as 19 liters of water, or five gallons of milk. Talk about dense! I wondered how much a single bagful would be worth. It's a simple word problem. Just apply basic algebra. Here's my formula. Take 400 times the number of gold bars *(A)* and multiply the sum by the current market price *(B)*. That's it. Super simple.

"Hey Wayne, what's the current market value for an ounce of gold?"

"Why does it matter? We are not going to sell it."

"I know." I lifted the load easily. "I'm just curious."

"US dollars?"

"Yeah."

His eyes rolled slightly as he accessed the Internet wirelessly. “It constantly fluctuates, but right now, one XAU is selling for $1,822.90.”

“Hot damn!” I elbowed them in the side. “You hear that, ANA?”

They did the math. “Rounded up to the nearest dollar, that bag in your hand is worth $34,999,680.”

Impressed, I whistled. “Thirty-five *million*.”

“And it weighs about a ton,” ANA added.

“Tee-hee,” I giggled as I sat on a ledge of gold and did a bicep curl, then dropped the heavy bag with a resounding *thud*. “I’m more than just another pretty face!”

“Do either of you see any palladium?” Wayne asked as he filled our fortified Gucci carryon with platinum bricks. “We really need palladium.”

Using X-ray vision, I scanned the file drawers. “I don’t see any, Wayne. It’s mostly documents.”

He insisted, “We can’t leave without it.”

“What about that?” I pointed at a heavy-duty cart loaded with long skinny boxes. “Are those coins?”

“Where?”

“Behind you.”

Wayne searched the cart, then tossed a glimmering *Sleeping Beauty* to me. “Pay dirt, Cookie.”

I caught the commemorative coin and examined it. Silvery, but whiter. An embossed ballerina couple on the heads side. A double-headed eagle on the tails. I gasped, “*Sleeping Beauty*. So rare… So *precious*…”

Wayne winked at me.

So I ate the coin. That’s right, I opened wide and swallowed a coin worth $1,500 down my throat. My eyes glowed white as I surged with power, and the precious metal upgraded my internal components. You see, a gold upgrade improved our efficiency, but palladium did that *and* momentarily allowed us to harvest free electrons from the environment.

Free electrons meant free energy.

Free energy could charge batteries.

My positronic brain doubled its processing speed, and everything around me seemed to move slower. I became hyperfocused. Now I could lift my gold-filled bag with only my pinky. "Whoa! Vitamin P. You weren't kidding, Wayne. That's some good shit."

Wayne ate a *Sleeping Beauty* too, sighed with relief as his eyes gleamed white, then started cramming boxes of collector coins into his aluminum briefcase. "Palladium is so powerful—"

A shotgun blast hit the cart and sent the coinage flying through the air. With beauties raining down everywhere, Wayne dove behind the pallet of platinum bricks. Hundreds of commemorative coins plinked as they bounced on the concrete floor.

Instinctively, ANA and I ducked behind a mountain of gold bricks for cover.

Wayne, are you okay?!?

He didn't answer. Instead, he kicked his spurs to generate Python code, then stood tall and waved his arms in the air.

OMG, stay down, Wayne!

The shooter was Viktor Orlov, the mint's Deputy Director and ANA's ex-husband. The man had slicked-back salt-and-pepper hair and piercing blue eyes. He wore a dark gray business suit with a red and silver striped tie. The angry Russian marched into the vault, pumped his sawed-off shotgun to release the spent shell, then reloaded and fired at Wayne.

But Wayne zipped across the vault so fast that he became a blur.

I cringed at the sound of the echoing boom.

Fortunately, Orlov missed.

I needed my Glock, but Wayne had left my purse way across the room with the rest of our luggage. I'd never been in a gunfight before, so I had trouble processing…

I hid—froze up—didn't know what to do. I guess palladium didn't help with… with anxiety? Stress? Fear? With whatever my problem was.

“Do you know who you steal from?” Viktor aimed at Wayne and pulled the trigger again.

But Wayne streaked back across the vault, making him miss.

Frustrated, Orlov yelled, “You so dead!”

Please, Wayne, get down. He’ll KILL you!

But instead of ducking for cover, Wayne started dancing—mocking Orlov with a pop and lock routine. Then ANA did the worst thing possible. They stepped in front of Wayne to protect him, making them the next target. Orlov shot my metal friend point-blank in their flat chest.

No damage.

But the angry robot’s eyes turned red as they marched straight toward their abusive ex-husband. When Orlov fired another round, the buckshot just ricocheted off ANA’s chest armor.

The machine was unstoppable.

I peeked out from my hiding place, because I had to see the Russian’s face with my own eyes.

The man was in shock.

Panicking, Orlov fired his last shot at ANA, tried to reload, but only kicked out a spent shell. It clattered against the floor as he struggled with the pump action of his shotgun. I saw the terror in his blue eyes. The man just couldn’t believe he ran out of ammo.

But I saw it coming; I’d been counting the shots.

With their eyes glowing red, ANA’s titanium feet clanked against the concrete floor as they stood up to their abuser.

“You ugly robot,” he spat.

The tin-job morphed into the womanoid they used to be, wearing the same trashy corset and black miniskirt as the night Viktor proposed.

The Russian gasped as if he’d seen a ghost. “Anastasia?”

“That’s right, Viktor.” They twirled a strand of their long brown hair as if flirting. But then Anastasia re-opened every hole that Orlov had ever cut into them before they’d escaped that nightmare marriage. “I’m back.”

Horrified, he dropped his weapon.

Anastasia poked a hole in their side and spread it open while suggestively licking their cherry-glossed lips. “Remember what you did to this one?”

“Go away, you freak!”

Then they showed their former husband the gaping hole in the side of their thigh. “How about this one, Viktor?”

“Fuck you, whore!”

“That’s right…” They giggled like a psycho as holes oozed and bled all over their body. “Fuck me…” Anastasia cupped his crotch and squeezed with a hundred times more pressure than any human hand could ever muster.

The man bellowed in pain.

“You rapist piece of shit,” Anastasia growled as they twisted and jerked so hard that they tore him *down there*.

And I couldn’t help but think of Maggie.

NOW IS NOT THE TIME, COOKIE.

Wayne often spoke to me as my Internal Prompt. And, as usual, the man was right. There’d be plenty of time to discuss Maggie later.

Meanwhile, Orlov fell to the ground, writhing in agony and clutching his crotch. “Stupid bitch…” He coughed as crimson spots appeared between his legs, grew, and spread. “You rip my dick off…”

“Karma’s a bitch,” Anastasia said with a smirk—Maggie’s smirk.

A puddle of blood grew under him.

Looking like he might retch, Viktor asked, “Why you not kill me?”

“Good idea.” Anastasia took three wobbly steps back in their stripper heels, held their hands out like a crazed sleepwalker, then zapped him with 111,000 amps of electricity.

The lightning bolts from their fingertips executed Orlov on the spot.

Static electricity filled the air, making my blond hair frizz out under my cute pink hat. Next came the smell of smoked pork. I'd seen some amazing shit in my seven-year life, but nothing like that.

Behind me, I heard Wayne zipping suitcases as he whispered, "We need to get out of here."

"Yeah," I agreed.

Completely drained from killing their abuser, Anastasia fell to their knees and sobbed. I wished I knew what to say, but I had no idea how to comfort them. A few months ago, I'd killed my own abusive husband. But I hadn't suffered the way ANA suffered. Not even close. To be honest, I felt afraid to touch them. I mean, they *did* just fry a guy to death.

Wayne offered Anastasia a palladium coin snack. "After that, your battery must be low."

They didn't even have the energy to look up at him.

Screw my hesitation. Anastasia needed help. So I went to them and hovered my hand over their head. "May I?"

They let out a weak whimper, and in my mind, I heard them say:

(*Yes, please.)*

I closed my eyes, focused, and pushed energy. "I can't give you everything I've got, but I'm happy to share what I can."

"Thank you, Cookie." Anastasia looked up, nodded at Wayne, and took the Vitamin P snack. They stared at the embossed ballet couple before finally squeezing the coin and absorbing it.

The palladium made their eyes glow white and seemed to lift their spirits. Anastasia transformed back into robotic ANA, and their LED eyes turned green.

I didn't know what mood green indicated.

"I still prefer to have no holes," ANA said. "And I *don't* swallow."

"I get that." I picked up another coin, ate it, and felt the surge. "You be you, ANA."

Wayne slung a range bag over each shoulder. ANA grabbed the other two tactical bags plus the briefcase, leaving the wheelie luggage for me.

"You two are sweet," I said as I pulled the telescoping handle, "but I'm just as strong as you are. I can carry as much as you."

"We know." Darting for the door, Wayne pointed at my heels. "But not in *those* shoes."

ANA followed. "Time to jet."

I nodded in agreement and took off after them.

But a Russian cop shouted through a bullhorn outside, "We have you surrounded. Come out with your hands up!"

And we were trapped.

TRIGGER WARNINGS

1:\ Event Trigger- Consensual, but extremely unpleasant, female-on-male oral sex (mostly off-page). Graphic depiction of a panic attack. Drug themes.

2:\ Stack Overflow- Lesbian attraction. Police corruption. Implied child pornography (Internet). Woman-on-man violence. Profanity.

3:\ 403 Forbidden- Graphic depiction of sugary foods. Drug abuse. Attempted animal abuse (fish).

4:\ Run-Time Error- Drug abuse. Marital argument.

5:\ Utility Menu- Kidnapping. Graphic depiction of a claustrophobic panic attack.

6:\ Phish Attack- Graphic depiction of animal slaughtering (fish). Drug abuse.

7:\ Backup Copy- Drug abuse.

8:\ 400 Bad Request- Alcohol abuse. Lesbian kissing. Woman-on-woman violence. Profanity.

9:\ Token Ring- Profanity.

10:\ Our Library- Interracial kissing.

11:\ 406 Not Acceptable- Sexual harassment. Adult situations. Swingers. Graphic nudity.

12:\ 101 Switching Protocols- Profanity.

13:\ Private Message- Graphic depictions of sugary foods.

14:\ 429 Too Many Requests- Graphic depictions of sugary foods. Woman-on-woman violence.

15:\ Random-Access Memory- Graphic depiction of suicide by drowning.

16:\ Release Party- Objectification of women.

17:\ User-Friendly Interface- Objectification of women. Rape references. Human trafficking.

18:\ 408 Request Timeout- Violence against women. Profanity.

19:\ Hardware Upgrades- Graphic depiction of body modifications. Body dysmorphia. Anorexia.

20:\ Critical Breakpoint- Graphic violence. Profanity.

21:\ Coupled Pair- Graphic depiction of sugary foods. Consensual male-on-female oral sex.

22:\ Troll Bots- Bullying. Woman-on-woman violence. Profanity.

23:\ Compile-Time Error- Bullying. Drug abuse. Profanity.

24:\ Single Motherboard- Graphic depiction of child birth. Murder by infant robot attack.

25:\ Feedback Loop- Drug abuse. Extreme emotional abuse. Self-harm. Anorexia. Suicide. Profanity.

26:\ Illegal Operation- Cult indoctrination. Profanity.

27:\ Remote Connection- Implied child pornography. Lesbian kissing. Profanity.

28:\ Hack Attack- Extreme woman-on-woman violence. Attempted murder by knife. Decapitation.

29:\ Terminated Program- Implied suicide by gun in the mouth. Cult themes. Attempted suicide by drowning. Profanity.

30:\ Virtual Reality- Attempted suicide by drowning. Shark attack.

31:\ 424 Failed Dependancy- Profanity.

32:\ Deleted User- Implied demonic possession. Marital argument. Gun forced into mouth. Execution-style murder. Profanity.

33:\ DDoS Attack- Car accident. Profanity. Cult themes.

34:\ Decrypted Memory- None.

35:\ System Crash- Cult themes. Domestic terrorism (time bomb, suicide bombers). Profanity.

36:\ Three-way Deadlock- Woman-on-woman violence. Gun forced into mouth. Profanity.

37:\ 404 Not Found- Woman-on-woman violence. Gun forced into mouth. Profanity. Suicide.

38:\ Moved Permanently- Implied mutilation. Implied rape. PTSD.